

# HUNTED HOME



*The 3rd book in the Sadéria Series*

SARAH RENÉE

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Sarah Renée

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Dedicated to

My Grandma

Who could make a simple game of cards fun, who  
could turn a bathroom wall into a beautiful painting,  
and who loved her family more than anything

# Chapter One

## Hated

Blood dripped out of Dingo's side, staining his brown fur crimson as it spilled onto the sand beneath him. Lying on the ground panting, he tried not to look up to see his attackers, knowing the anguish it would bring, but he couldn't block out their cruel jeers: two low growls and one hyena-like laugh.

"What's the matter, Dingo? Too scared to fight back?" a low, gruff voice taunted. Dingo knew that voice well; it belonged to Bone. "That's right—whimper on the ground, freak."

He winced and gritted his teeth to stop from howling in pain when something stung the numerous wounds on his side. He knew one of the dingoes must have kicked sand into his wounds. A moment later, the voice of Rock revealed it was he who had done it. "Does it hurt, Dingo? You deserve that and worse."

"Pathetic," Bone growled. This time Dingo did let out a loud howl as strong fangs tore into his shoulder. He shuddered in disgust when he felt the sticky blood flow down his leg and seep into his fur.

"You're such a loser, Dingo!" another voice chortled, forcing Dingo to squeeze his eyes shut tighter against the rush of pain. The voice belonged to Rip, but hard as he tried, Dingo could never hate him the way he hated Bone and Rock.

"Open your eyes." Bone's dangerous growl sent shivers down his spine as he turned away from him, still with his eyes shut. He felt as if he was on fire from the burning anguish coursing through him after what Bone, Rock, and Rip had done to him.

Gasping, he finally dared to open his eyes, their light brown depths darkened with sadness. His breath caught in horror at the sight of Bone's sadistic, sneering face staring down at him. The piercing desert sunlight made Bone's amber eyes glint with bloodlust and his dark brown, almost black fur stood out against the endless yellow brown sand all around them.

The muscles in his shoulders made him look like a lethal weapon as his tail flicked joyfully back and forth. Bone loved Dingo's pain.

"Had enough, Dingo?" he snarled quietly.

Dingo turned his light brown eyes to him with a pleading expression. "Bone, enough. Just stop this!"

But a second later, he let out a howl of pain when Bone clawed him across his face. His dark, quiet laughter floated over to Dingo's bloody ears as Dingo fought to stop tears from pricking his eyes. Dingoes weren't supposed to cry.

"Leave me alone," he growled through gritted teeth.

Bone just laughed as another dingo stepped forward to stand beside him. The other dingo, Rock, with his long, dusty brown fur and dark brown eyes, smirked down at him like Bone. Dingo felt his body tense with anger and sadness; it was one thing for Bone, his own brother, to torture him, but did he have to get his friend in on it, too? He looked up at his brother, but Bone's eyes glinted dangerously, as if to warn him against protesting. And of course he didn't even as a third dingo named Rip crept forward to stand on Bone's left.

Dingo turned to look at his other brother, Rip, with sad eyes. Rip carefully avoided his gaze. He was grinning like the other two, but his yellow eyes looked very uneasy. Rip wasn't evil; he just followed Bone's evil crowd. Dingo could never hate him for that, considering Bone sometimes treated his followers just as bad as his enemies. Rip's unkempt, reddish fur was standing a bit on end, an obvious sign of his unease.

"Rip," Dingo sighed, "why are you doing this?"

His brother's yellow eyes were suddenly flaming. "Shut up! You deserve it."

"Well said, Rip," Bone chuckled. "You and Rock can go back to camp now, though. I'll finish up here."

Dingo felt the urge to beg them not to leave him alone with Bone, especially Rip, but he didn't dare. Rip was rather quick to leave while Rock just shrugged and turned around to lumber apathetically back to camp. Dingo cast a glance back at his lacerated body and could barely make out the shaggy, brown fur beneath the blood. His scruffy tail flicked back and forth in distress as he looked back up at Bone, who was sneering at him with an evil glint in his eyes.

“Bone,” he said hoarsely, “you’ve already done enough. Let’s just go back to camp.”

He laughed. “No, I don’t think so.”

Dingo sighed, wanting to bury his face in the sand. “Why do you do this to me?”

That was probably a dumb question; Bone did it because he hated Dingo and because he could get away with it. Dingo was hated by the other evil dingoes in his pack, after all, so they wouldn’t punish Bone if he attacked him.

“Why do you and the others hate me so much?” Dingo asked another pointless question, not really expecting an answer.

Bone just shook his head and as Dingo had anticipated offered no real response. “We hate you because you’re weak, because you don’t fight,” he growled. He chuckled darkly. “You are so pathetic, Dingo. You wouldn’t even defend yourself.”

“What exactly was I supposed to do? There were three of you!” Dingo shouted, his temper rising as it always did when he was alone with his oldest brother.

“Fight back,” Bone replied.

“Oh, and then what? You’d just use that as an excuse to kill me?”

“That’s the plan.” When Dingo growled furiously, Bone just laughed. “You know I’m out to get you, Dingo, and that’s ruining your life.”

Dingo looked away.

“Well?” Bone prompted. “Isn’t it?”

“My life’s already been ruined, Bone,” Dingo muttered, his gaze automatically turning to the stars twinkling above them in the night sky. As his thoughts turned again to his sister an anguish far stronger than that he would ever feel from anything Bone and his minions did to him burned through his body. He nearly let out a howl and just barely managed to hold it in as fierce grief, sorrow, and guilt clouded his mind.

He suddenly noticed the satisfied look on Bone’s face as his brother realized what he must be thinking about; Bone knew that his sister’s fate had hurt him most of all.

Dingo felt sick. “You don’t even care about what happened to Claw.”



Bone shrugged. "I never have. I got over her death like everyone else, when you should have."

"She was all I had."

Bone's eyes gleamed. "I know." He glanced behind him. "I'm going back to camp now and you can crawl back, too, or just lay out here and die; I don't really care which. If you do come back, try to wash the blood off of you first so the rest of us back at camp don't have to look at it."

As Bone turned to walk away, Dingo gritted his teeth. "'Wash the blood off...'" He growled furiously to himself and dug his claws into the sand, trying to ease his fury. Struggling to his paws, he looked out at the desert around him that was his home, his ears drooping with misery. He didn't want to go back to the dingo camp, but that would just mean Bone had won. Sighing, he started forward with his head down and his tail dragging, trying to ignore the pain shooting up his legs and down his spine every time he put a paw down.

It hurt, but Dingo was used to Bone's torture by that point in his life; his older brother had hated him since they were pups. He wasn't the only one either. Dingo had tried not to let it get to him and had even tried to get along with Bone at first, but he had found out long ago that that was an impossibility.

He looked ahead and unconsciously slowed down when he saw the dingo camp, his eyes narrowing with defeat. He really didn't want to go in there and put up with the other dingoes' taunting, but he had no choice.

The entrance to the dingoes' camp was marked by two piles of bones left over from the prey they hunted. The sandy ground dipped down into a sort of valley surrounded by sandy hills. On the side of each hill was a dark, rocky den partially hidden from view by the sand covering it. All the dens were formed within the larger surrounding sand dunes, but the two largest dens sat at the back of the valley. There was a large water trough made of rock in the center of the camp, but otherwise the place was very bare like the desert itself. Around the camp, all of the dingoes were going about their normal activities and Dingo dared to hope that they wouldn't bother him much.

As he stepped into his camp, Dingo was sure he must look pretty bad. To confirm his thoughts, Tear, his other brother, crawled out of the den,

looked at him, and raised his eyebrows. His yellow eyes were filled with a mixture of surprise and perhaps amusement.

“What happened to you?” he asked, proving it to be mostly amusement.

Dingo flattened his ears. “Thanks for the concern, Tear.”

Tear just shrugged with a stupid grin. “Did you get attacked again?”

Dingo sighed and stepped into camp, heading for the den that he shared with two of his three brothers. “Yes, Tear, I got attacked *again*.”

“By Bone?”

“Of course.”

Tear just chuckled to which Dingo shot him an annoyed glance. “You know, this might be funny to you, but you’re not the one bleeding and suffering. You’re not the one everybody hates.”

“Oh, lighten up,” Tear said. “So everybody hates you. So what? I would have thought you’d be used to it by now.”

Dingo gave him a dry look. “Yes, Tear, I’ve certainly come to *love* their hatred. It’s simply heartwarming.”

“Well, you know, if you just changed, you wouldn’t be hated.”

“Change into what? A battle-hungry, murderous hound? Thanks, but no thanks.”

Tear just rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Dingo. I really don’t know why you haven’t been exiled yet, but if you don’t change, it’ll happen.”

Dingo sighed; everybody was always telling him he’d be exiled, sent away to live on his own far away from the pack. It really didn’t seem so bad unless he counted the fact that most outcasts starved to death and the fact that the pack hunted them down like prey. If he could ignore those little details, it would seem like a vacation. “At this point, Tear, I really wouldn’t mind being an outcast,” Dingo muttered.

Tear looked at him like he was insane. “If you like dying then go ahead.” He paused and seemed to think for a moment. “Wait, I think I know why you haven’t been exiled yet. You *are* the son of the Leader of the pack, so it would probably make him look bad if his own son was an outcast. That is, it would make him look even *worse* since you’ve already embarrassed him by being so weak.”

“Wow, I feel so ashamed,” Dingo muttered sarcastically. He rolled his eyes. “Listen, Tear, it’s been fun discussing how much I’m hated around

here, but I just got mauled by our brothers and I'm not in a great mood for talking."

Tear shrugged. "Fine. I'll go see what Rip is doing."

"Probably laughing at me," Dingo growled as they parted ways.

Dingo thought about simply hiding in his den for the rest of the day, but the sticky blood was starting to make him feel incredibly uncomfortable. With a sigh, he started off toward the water trough in the center of the camp to wash it off. As he walked, he glanced up ahead at the largest den sitting at the very back of the camp on the side of the largest sand dune. The land sloped upward toward the large den, giving it the appearance of towering over everyone else. It was the Leader's den where Dingo's father would be resting. Dingo tried not to look that way since he didn't particularly like his father who had never had anything to do with him.

Right beside the huge den was another large den that was exclusive to another dingo who had control over the pack: the Second in Command. Who happened to be Bone. When Dingo spared a glance in that direction, he saw Bone sitting outside his large den, talking to Rock with his typical cocky grin. Bone was the second most powerful dingo in the pack after their father and he made sure everyone knew that.

Ignoring the sudden dark stare of his older brother, Dingo stalked over to the water trough. He dipped his tail in to flick the water over the rest of his body and wash the sticky blood off, trying not to wince when the gritty water splashed against his wounds. When at last he was relatively clean, he tried to avoid looking at his ragged, scarred reflection in the water. With a sigh, he turned to walk away then stopped and pricked his ears when he heard the sound of Rip's rough voice.

When Dingo looked around to spot him, he noticed Rip sitting next to Tear, their yellow eyes glowing with dark amusement. While Rip was fairly skinny with dark red fur, Tear was slightly heavier with lighter orange fur. Obviously Bone had grown tired of Rip's company and sent him to go hang out with Tear. Since Rip was more like Bone's minion than his friend, he only got to hang around with him when Bone felt like it; the rest of the time he spent with Tear.

Unable to drown out the incessant noise of Rip bragging to Tear about what he, Bone, and Rock had done to him, Dingo growled and

stalked into the den that he shared with Rip and Tear. Had Bone not been Second in Command, he would have shared the den with his brothers, as well, but thankfully Dingo could usually escape him there.

When he glanced over his shoulder Bone appeared to be recounting the tale to everyone. Bone caught his eye and sneered at him, his creepy amber eyes glowing with whatever dark thoughts were going through his mind, all of them most likely involving Dingo dying in some way or another. Turning bitterly away from his brother's sneer, Dingo crouched down and slipped into his small rock den where he slumped down on the sandy floor. Once again he found himself longing for his sister's comfort and kind words.

For several moments, he lay there in the painful aftermath of the brutal attack, filled with misery as he thought about the pack's cruel ways. Closing his eyes in sorrow, he relived his past, how the dingoes had always been cruel and how they had always hated him.

The dingoes of the pack fought and sometimes killed for fun and always got away with it. The pack only liked evil, bloodthirsty animals who killed and were willing to do anything to get what they wanted, not dingoes like him who actually cared about them and wanted the violence to stop. They didn't like dingoes who thought for themselves instead of obeying everything the Leader and Second in Command said. They called those dingoes 'different' and usually exiled them from the pack to live alone in the desert. From then on, they were only known as outcasts and were treated horribly by the pack. The pack loved to kill things, especially outcasts, because it was easy to get away with; the pack actually praised the killers.

It was only because of luck, either good or bad, that Dingo wasn't dead or an outcast yet, although Bone was always trying to find a reason to exile him. But even though he stayed in the pack he was constantly ridiculed and harassed by the others for being 'different'.

His sister had been different, too, but nobody knew and now she was gone.

He jumped when his dark thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the shuffling of claws against sand. Slowly he raised his eyes to see Rip and Tear enter the den, still laughing and chatting about what a wimp he was.

“You should have seen him!” Rip snickered. “He was terrified, as always! Stupid Dingo! Bone and I tore him apart!”

“I wish I’d been there!” Tear exclaimed.

Rip laughed. “Yeah, you should have been! We really ripped Dingo to shreds!”

Dingo looked up in mingled sadness and irritation, knowing it was useless to try to block them out. “Do you two *mind*?” he growled. “I came in here to *escape* your annoying voices.”

Rip glared at him. “Well, you can leave again. And you can never come back for all I care! Just stop bothering me!”

Dingo simply turned away with a low growl.

“Anyway, where were we before the freak interrupted us?” Rip growled, turning back to Tear and muttering, “I can’t believe we still have to share a den with him!”

“Yeah, Bone’s lucky,” Tear agreed. “He gets that cool Second in Command den.” He curled his lip in jealousy.

Rip rolled his eyes, suddenly annoyed. “I know. But Bone’s the oldest of us, so he’s always going to be better off.” Casting an evil glance at Dingo, he added mockingly, “Whereas the youngest over here is destined to be a failure for the rest of his life.”

Dingo rolled his eyes and curled himself up tighter even though he was used to the taunts. “You’ve been spending too much time with Bone,” he muttered to Rip. “But I guess he needs a good little slave like you.”

Tear snickered while Rip narrowed his yellow eyes in anger. “I’m no slave!” he snarled. “That’s your job.”

“I don’t cater to you!” Dingo retorted.

Rip growled in annoyance and turned away from him. “Maybe I can find a way to move in with Bone and away from Dingo,” he muttered to himself before flopping down in his usual spot in the small, rocky den, the old scars on his red face oddly illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the entrance. With a snort, Tear padded forward to lie down next to him, falling asleep the instant his orange head hit the ground.

Sighing, Dingo laid his head down on his brown paws, his long brown fur feeling uncomfortably cold without the presence of Claw sleeping beside him, something he still remembered and missed. Wincing, he curled up even tighter in the dark, silent den. He had tried to tell himself

to get over his sister's death—it had been a year—but he never could and each night he hoped to see her light brown body lying peacefully beside him. He still woke up expecting to see her smiling face first thing in the morning; he could still picture the kindness in her light brown eyes.

Flinching with grief, Dingo pushed those images from his mind and tried to force himself to sleep, wishing he would never have to wake up to face the pack and endure another horrible day. There seemed to be no end to the agonizing cycle. With all the taunts and attacks he suffered every day, Dingo would have given up and let one of the pack members kill him if not for the promise he had made to Claw to keep going even when it got difficult.

Letting out a sigh, Dingo tried not to think about Claw or the promise, but sadly he couldn't stop himself from thinking about how she would never smile at him ever again. Dingo felt only pain where his heart was supposed to be when he reminded himself once again that Claw was gone. He knew he had taken all of his time with her for granted and he knew he should have valued her eleven years of life much more than he had. A flash of deep pain and guilt made him wince when he remembered that it was all his fault Claw was dead.

# Chapter Two

## Unknown Trouble

A soft breeze rustled through the small room as broken yellow sunlight filtered in through the open window, rustling the curtains and whispering across the orange, black-striped fur of the tiger Princess. With a quiet sigh, Saderia slowly raised her head, blinking her amber eyes against the intruding light of the rising sun and smiling to herself as she pushed her soft blue blanket away. As her eyes adjusted to the gentle morning light, she flicked her gaze around her light blue room and smiled as she took in the familiar desk opposite the bed, the large drawer in the corner, and the open door of the closet.

With a quiet yawn, she carefully pulled herself off of her soft blue bed and hopped to the ground. Her tail trailed across the light blue carpet as she padded drowsily toward the door. Her tired amber eyes gleamed as she crept out into the elaborate hallway and slipped into the open door of the room beside her. She rolled her eyes when she found her newly adopted brother still asleep in his dark blue bed, his dark brown mane splayed out across the pillow in its usual messy way. Hiding another yawn, she padded through the room that seemed almost like a replica of her own before propping her front paws up on the bed and peering down at the dark brown lion.

“Dash,” she hissed, tapping her friend lightly on the side. “Dash, wake up! It’s time for school!”

Dash’s amber eyes fluttered open and he slowly rolled around to look at her. With a soft gasp, he jumped, only to relax a moment later when he recognized her. He smiled sheepishly as he slowly sat up in his bed. “You could have let me sleep in a little more,” he protested good-naturedly.

Saderia just snorted and rolled her eyes before turning around and padding toward the door. She flicked her fluffy orange tail in an indication for him to follow her. Her ears flicked when she heard a soft thud behind her and glanced up with a smile when Dash padded up beside her.

Taking the lead, Saderia padded happily down the royal hallway, her tail swishing excitedly through the air. “You’re lucky I woke you up or you would have slept in all day,” she exclaimed, giving Dash a playful glance. Dash just shrugged sheepishly as she added, “Come on, let’s get breakfast so we can go to school. I want to see how Loki’s doing.”

“Okay,” Dash said, hurrying to keep up with her as they darted through the front room and slipped past the elegant archway that framed the entrance to the dining room.

As Saderia stared at the solid gold table that occupied the room, three tigers sitting around the table looked up at her and smiled. Saderia smiled back as she and Dash moved to take their place on the right side of the table, opposite her aunt and uncle and close to her father, who sat at the end of the table.

“Good morning, Saderia, Dash,” he said, his green eyes bright with happiness as he smiled at his daughter and adopted son.

Saderia grinned back at him and said, “Good morning, Dad,” while Dash echoed, “Good morning, Makero.”

“Did you two sleep well?” Saderia looked up as her aunt Cia spoke up from across the table, her blue eyes tired but friendly.

She nodded with a smile as her uncle Jash looked up, grinned at them, and said, “That’s good. It must be pretty easy to get a good night’s sleep now that things have calmed down, right?”

“Yeah,” Saderia agreed while Dash nodded. Her lion friend seemed about to say something, but before he could speak a word another tiger entered the room, carrying a platter of food and smiling when she saw her family.

“Good morning everyone!” Karenisha called as she passed plates of food around and sat down on the end of the table opposite Makero. She smiled at Saderia and Dash and added, “Are you two looking forward to school?”

Saderia nodded. “Yeah. Dash wanted to sleep in, but I can’t wait to see Loki!”

Dash gave her a playful glare and smiled back at Karenisha. “I’m glad we’re going, too.”

The Queen smiled and glanced down at her food. “That’s good.”



She leaned forward to take a bite out of her meal, but before she could, Cia's teasing voice exclaimed, "This looks good, Karenisha...but I could probably do better."

Karenisha looked up at her in mock annoyance. "Really?" she said, her tone giving away her playfulness. "I'd like to see you try."

Cia sniffed, hiding a grin. "I'd be happy to show you how it's done, sis."

Karenisha opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say a word, Makero looked up and exclaimed, "All right, you two, calm down." His green eyes glittered as he paused and added, "Although it is kind of funny to watch you two fight like you did when you were cubs."

Karenisha gave him a playful glare and flicked a piece of food at him before they began to eat.

Saderia shook her head and grinned to herself as she looked around at her playful family. As King and Queen of the forest, Saderia knew that most animals thought Makero and Karenisha were formal and stuck-up, but there couldn't be anything farther from the truth. Saderia felt a tingle of relief when she realized how much her parents and her family had changed after so much time had passed since their release from capture. They seemed much happier, more carefree, and less tense now that many weeks had passed since they had escaped the horrible dungeons they had been locked in for so long.

Her bright amber gaze darkened as she recalled the fearful events of the past. Ten long years ago, an evil lion named Dastarius had captured Karenisha and Makero and held them captive in order to steal the throne and take over the forest. Saderia had saved them ten years later with Dash's help after she had struggled to learn the truth about her parent's strange disappearance. Soon after she had freed her family from Dastarius's dark dungeon she had discovered the incredible royal secret of Dreams—nightmares that could predict the future—as well as the ancient royal prophecy that had singled her out as the animal with the most powerful Dream sense in the entire royal family.

"So how is school, Saderia?" Karenisha asked conversationally, pulling her out of her dark, daunting thoughts. "Dash?"

"Still great," Saderia reported with a smile, trying to shake off her unease.

“It is great!” Dash replied enthusiastically. “Everyone’s a lot nicer now except for the L’s and Grath. But who cares about them? Loki hangs out with us sometimes, too, and she’s a lot of fun! *And there are no more secrets,*” Dash added under his breath.

“Yeah, Loki always manages to talk us into races!” Saderia exclaimed, thinking fondly of her cheetah friend and forgetting her worries about the past.

Her family smiled and Saderia turned to Dash, smiling when she realized how much more at ease he seemed and how playful and calm he had become after adjusting to his new life with Saderia’s family. Because Dash was Dastarius’s son, he had seemed nervous and uncomfortable around them in the past. Thankfully, none of Saderia’s family seemed to care about his dark bloodlines or his cruel father since the two had nothing in common apart from their dark brown fur and amber eyes. Dash had already been living with them long enough that they barely even remembered the two different lions shared the same blood.

Saderia and Dash had become friends when Saderia had first gone to school several months ago and joined him in the same fifth grade classroom. At first, Dash had seemed to avoid her, but soon they found themselves drawn to each other. They quickly formed a close friendship that was shaken only when Saderia discovered the truth about Dash’s parentage. Eventually, after some rough times and a lot of explaining and apologizing, Saderia had realized that Dash truly was a good animal despite his heritage.

Soon after, Saderia’s family had decided to let Dash move in with them since his only home was in a cold clearing out in the woods. Once he had agreed to live with them, Saderia had eagerly shown him around the house and Karenisha and Makero had announced to the whole forest at a royal meeting that he was their new son. For the most part, the forest animals, though at first confused and reluctant, had grown to accept it. Dash had seemed a bit uneasy about living with them, but now neither Saderia nor Dash could imagine life away from each other.

Blinking out of her thoughts, Saderia looked up at her family and grinned as she told them about some of the fun times she and Dash had shared with Loki at school. When Saderia finished her breakfast, the gold chair moved silently across the floor and she leapt down. She looked up

with a grateful smile when her mother carefully stepped away from the table, left the room, and returned with two stuffed book bags for Saderia and Dash.

“Thanks, Mom,” Saderia said, beaming as she slung the blue bag over her shoulder. She looked back with a smile when Dash shyly echoed her thanks.

The Queen smiled and nuzzled Saderia affectionately. “You two have fun at school,” she replied, gazing down at them with glowing amber eyes as Cia, Uncle Jash, and Makero echoed her kind words.

“We will,” Saderia told them as she skipped toward the door with Dash following close beside her. The two of them waved goodbye to their family as they pushed open the door and let it close silently behind them.

Saderia drew in a long, deep breath of fresh, dew-scented air and gazed out at her peaceful forest home. Her eyes lazily followed the rustling green leaves of the trees around her as the wind whistled in and out of their strong branches. Her paws brushed lightly against the damp grass and her fur gleamed in the yellow light of the sun. She sighed happily as she stepped toward the familiar dirt path that led from her secluded royal home into town. The sunlight blinked out at them through thick clumps of trees as their paws slipped onto the dusty dirt path. They occasionally glanced up at the trees rising up on either side of them as they made their way towards the town.

“So what do you want to do this weekend?” Saderia asked as they padded onward, enjoying the woodsy view on either side of the path.

“We could go exploring in the woods,” Dash suggested. “Not my old woods, but some other woods.” He paused and cast an uneasy glance out at the forest as if remembering the miserable clearing he had lived in before he had moved in with Saderia.

“Yeah, we could do that on Saturday,” Saderia replied. “We can figure out what woods to explore later.”

“All right.” Dash turned and opened his mouth to continue, but before he could speak a word, he was interrupted by a quick, familiar voice from behind them.

“Hey, guys!”

Saderia and Dash whirled around with surprised glances then smiled when they saw a familiar cheetah race toward them at an impossible speed.

A bright grin spread across the cheetah's spotted face when she skidded to a halt in front of them.

"Loki!" Saderia exclaimed, beaming at her friend. "It's good to see you!"

Loki grinned, although her friendly smile seemed almost forced. "Hey, Saderia! Hey, Dash! It's good to see you guys, too!" Her bright green eyes sparkled in the dazzling sunlight, but when Saderia looked closer she couldn't help but notice a shadow of worry on her face, a great contrast to her usual carefree attitude. Saderia frowned, her amber eyes narrowing with worry as she studied her friend's troubled gaze.

Though Loki seemed like her usual happy self, Saderia had begun to notice a dark change in her normally playful attitude ever since last week when she had begun to avoid her friends. Lately, she seemed to try to hide a distressed expression that occasionally flitted across her face. Her strange behavior had baffled Saderia and now that she studied her friend's anxious gaze she realized that whatever was bothering Loki hadn't been resolved. The thought worried Saderia.

Loki, who was usually so bright and full of energy, even cocky at times, never let anything bother her yet now her gaze was marred by dark bags under her eyes. If Loki, who took life in stride and never worried about anything, appeared to be losing sleep over something, there was probably something very wrong.

"Loki?" Saderia whispered. "What's wrong? Is something bothering you?"

Loki shook her head and turned away from them. "No, it's just...just something the leopards are worried about."

"The leopards?" Dash asked, tipping his head to the side.

"Yeah, I live with them. I'm half-leopard, remember? Anyway, I live in a place called the Home of the Leopards. We all tend to look after each other and group together, so if one of us has a problem, we all do."

"Oh," Saderia said. "What are the leopards worried about?"

Loki sighed. "It's hard to describe. I mean, it doesn't seem like a big deal but..." She shook her head. "Never mind. You'll hear about it soon, I imagine. You two *are* the Princess and Prince, after all."

Saderia realized with a feeling of unease that it must be a serious problem if the leopards would go to the King and Queen. "Do you need

help...?" she asked.

Loki narrowed her eyes. "We can handle it just fine," she snapped defensively. "We just want the King and Queen to know about it, that's all." She paused and sighed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you two. Mom says I'm too proud—she's right, I guess."

Before Saderia could wave away the apology and ask about the problem again, Loki muttered, "Look, I'll meet you guys at the school. I've got errands to run for all the leopards. I'm the fastest, being part-cheetah, so they usually send me to get stuff for them and hey, I'm in for a couple of bucks."

"Okay," Saderia said, shrugging uncomfortably. "I'll see you later then."

"Later," Loki responded softly.

"Should I tell Ms. Spot you'll be a little late?" she offered.

Loki managed to smile a ghost of her familiar haughty/friendly grin and shook her head. "No, that's okay. I'll make it to school on time and besides, Ms. Spot's one of the leopards I'm running an errand for."

Saderia blinked in surprise before smiling weakly back at her. "Oh, okay. Cool. Well, I'll see you in class."

Loki glanced down, her spirits sinking once more. "See you, Saderia. You too, Dash."

"Bye, Loki," Dash replied, seeming bothered by her downcast mood, as well.

The cheetah smiled half-heartedly before bolting away from them and disappearing behind a clump of woods that hid the nearby town from sight. Saderia and Dash slowly got up and began padding down the dirt path, reaching the town just in time to see a spotted yellow blur disappear into one of the nearby shops.

Saderia smiled as she padded past the small, familiar stores, her eyes darting over to the patch of grass in the center of the town. Several animals stopped there to talk before going about their daily business. The sounds of chatting and laughter reached her ears as she watched the forest animals pad through the worn, grassy clearing, their eyes scanning the shops surrounding the center of the town. She caught sight of some of them eyeing the many dirt paths branching off into the woods around them.

Tearing her gaze away from the peaceful goings-on, Saderia looked down when her paws brushed against the familiar trampled path that would lead her to her school. As the dense woods swallowed up the town behind her, Saderia glanced over at Dash and managed a slight smile before her thoughts drifted back to Loki. Her tail flicked restlessly back and forth as she padded past tall leafy trees and budding bushes and listened to the sound of her paws thudding against the ground. Her amber gaze brightened when she saw the school rise up from behind the thick green canopy of trees.

A smile lit up her face as she bounded forward into the large grassy clearing, beaming and looking up at the orange brick school building. The sounds of laughter and conversation around her broke the silence of the morning and filled her ears when she stepped closer to the school. Saderia glanced around at the young students filling the clearing and waved when some of them paused to greet her and Dash. The two padded toward the large double doors of the school and were met with a rush of cool air when they pushed them open. Saderia glanced around the familiar room and the two hallways branching off of it at the very back. Students traveled rapidly back and forth in groups of two or three just a few feet in front of her. She flicked her amber gaze over to the door on the right side of the large room and waved when she saw a black panther standing by the door. She beamed when the school principal waved back.

“Things sure have changed,” Dash noted as the two of them began padding toward the left hallway that would take them to their fifth grade classroom.

Saderia nodded. “For the better, for sure.”

Dash nodded and smiled as they turned down another hallway and lightly pushed open the door at the very end. When the door swung open, Saderia glanced into Ms. Spot’s classroom and looked toward the teacher’s desk sitting near the whiteboard at the front of the room. The leopard teacher looked down at a clump of papers, her expression unreadable. As Saderia and Dash padded into the room, Saderia’s eyes picked out several familiar faces above the desks lining the classroom. She and Dash moved toward the back to put up their book bags then rapidly darted forward to take their seats together at the front of the class. Saderia found herself

immediately looking back and scanning the room to see how the rest of the animals were doing and to see if anyone seemed as worried as Loki.

Her eyes immediately fell onto a black panther sitting at a desk behind the one right beside hers. The dark panther bully, Grath, seemed unchanged when he met Saderia's stare and glared back at her.

"Grath needs a life," Dash hissed in Saderia's ear, his amber eyes gleaming with amusement.

"You can say that again," Saderia agreed with a slight grin. Her smile faded as she continued scanning the crowd and paused on three familiar girls known as the L's.

The three girls—a lioness, a panther, and a leopard—sat a few feet away from her in desks that had been scooted as close together as possible. The lioness named Lizzie and the panther named Lily were talking quietly about something, but for some reason Lisa, the leopard, seemed distracted and didn't bother to jump into the L's conversation. Lizzie snickered something that was most likely condescending and loudly exclaimed, "Right, Lisa?"

Lisa didn't reply. Her grayish blue gaze clouded as she stared off into space at something none of them could see. After a long moment, she blinked as if returning to the present and muttered, "Oh. Yeah, Lizzie. Right."

Lizzie narrowed her eyes at her. "What's your problem lately, Lisa?"

"Nothing. There's just something going on at home," Lisa muttered distractedly. "Get off my back, Lizzie." She gave her friend an uncharacteristically hostile look before sighing and laying her spotted head down on the desk between her paws.

"Like what?" Lizzie demanded, narrowing her pale green eyes.

Lisa let out a long sigh. "I can't tell you."

"Well!" Lizzie burst out. "If you can't even tell your friends then maybe we aren't your friends anymore!" Lizzie glared at her while Lily echoed, "Yeah, Lisa."

Lisa gave them a hurt glare. "Fine. You two were never great friends anyway."

"You go, Lisa." The three girls looked up with Saderia and Dash to see Loki pad silently into the classroom and over to Lisa, her green eyes dull. "Want to come sit with me?" she offered almost tiredly.

“Sure,” Lisa murmured to the complete shock of Lizzie and Lily. She gathered her school materials and silently climbed out of her chair to follow Loki to her seat.

“Ms. Spot?” Loki called, glancing up with weary eyes.

Ms. Spot barely looked up as if she didn’t have the energy or the will to. “Lisa, you can sit in the seat behind Loki from now on. Grath, you can have Lisa’s seat.”

Grath looked up at her with a glare. “Why should I have to move?” he growled.

Ms. Spot looked up and narrowed her eyes at him. “Just...move...” she growled.

Grath glared at her for a moment longer before finally shoving himself out of the chair and moving to Lisa’s seat, grumbling the whole time.

“Thanks, Ms. Spot,” Loki murmured as she passed Grath and slouched down in her seat. Lisa timidly took her new seat behind Loki.

Saderia was stunned; the L’s hated Loki and Lisa usually went along with them to try to fit in and be accepted. Since when did Lisa stand up to L and L and so bluntly go to sit with their worst enemy? Saderia blinked several times as if unable to believe that the timid Lisa she had always known had stood up to the L’s.

Although, Lisa *had* seemed a bit different lately...

Lizzie and Lily gaped at Lisa in shock, their baffled expressions mirroring Saderia’s. “You’re hanging out with *Loki*?” Lizzie exclaimed. “The freaky cheepard? What is *wrong* with you?”

“You think *Loki* is better than us?” Lily seconded.

“You’re despicable!” Lizzie exclaimed. “We’re sorry we were ever your friends!”

Lisa turned around and opened her mouth to say something to them, but before she could try to defend herself, Loki leaned back and grabbed her arm, pulling her around to face her. “Don’t bother,” she muttered. “They aren’t worth it.”

“We aren’t worth it?” Lizzie shouted at Loki. She narrowed her eyes in disgust. “You should talk, you freak! How dare you steal our friend from us? You’re just a freaky, unworthy crossbreed!”

“Yeah, whatever, got that,” Loki muttered, staring down at her desk.



Again, Saderia was surprised. Loki was usually a lot more lively than that and always ready to insult the L's, but now she wasn't even trying.

Lizzie blinked in surprise and stared at Loki, clearly not expecting the easy victory. Lily frowned in confusion before lowering her voice and whispering, "What's with them?"

Lizzie just shrugged and bitterly turned her back on them, spitting one last insult over her shoulder. "Friend-stealer!"

Loki didn't reply.

Saderia and Dash exchanged a nervous glance.

"What's wrong with all the leopards?" Dash whispered, narrowing his eyes in bewilderment. "Loki's upset, Lisa's upset, even Ms. Spot doesn't seem like herself!"

Saderia cast a glance at the leopard teacher and noticed for the first time that her fur was ruffled and unkempt and her moss green eyes were shadowed with worry. She seemed to barely glance at the papers in front of her before shifting them again.

Saderia frowned and turned back to Dash. "You're right. What is going on? Are they in trouble?"

Dash glanced at Loki and when he looked back at Saderia, his amber eyes were dark with worry. "I don't know, but like Loki said, we'll probably find out soon."

The rest of the day passed by in a blur as Saderia struggled to understand the leopards' strange discomfort. Her attention shifted from her schoolwork to the leopards when she didn't force herself to concentrate on her lessons. Before the day was even half over, she began to wish she could go home to see if her parents had heard anything about the leopards' mysterious problem. When at last Saderia and the other students were released from class to go to lunch and recess, she just barely concealed a sigh of relief.

After sharing theories about what might be bothering the leopards at lunch, Saderia and Dash found themselves searching for their familiar spotted friend on the recess field. Ignoring the welcoming burst of fresh air and the peaceful rustling of the trees surrounding the school, Saderia quickly scanned the crowd of playful, excited students for one spotted face. She blinked in surprise when she realized that Loki was nowhere to be seen

anywhere on the recess field or the basketball court. After several moments, Saderia finally spotted her cheetah-leopard friend sitting on one of the benches around the recess field beside Lisa. The two leopards kept their unusually dark gazes on the ground as they talked quietly.

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise as she wondered why they seemed so downcast. Loki never sat on the bench and she never talked to one of the L's in such a calm, civilized way. Any other day she would most likely be on the basketball court challenging anyone dumb enough to think they could win. Looking around, Saderia realized that Loki wasn't the only leopard who had lost her energy to have fun. None of the spotted forest animals seemed to have any interest in playing and almost all of them seemed to be afflicted with the same worried expression that Loki wore.

Saderia exchanged a glance with Dash then whirled around when she heard the sound of paw steps behind her. She blinked in shock when she saw Lizzie and Lily pad cautiously toward them, their eyes gleaming with something other than hostility. Her eyes narrowed in confusion as she stared at the two anxious forest animals. Had the whole world flipped overnight?

"Saderia..." Lizzie began.

It probably had, Saderia decided, since Lizzie never called her by her real name. Before, she had always called her *Princess*.

"What is it, Lizzie?" Saderia asked cautiously, frowning when she read the unease in the two girls' pale green and light blue gazes.

Lizzie paused. "Well, you hang out with the freak...er, *Loki*," she corrected, "and she stole Lisa and now both of them are acting really weird. Do you know what's going on?"

Saderia shook her head and glanced over at her lion friend when Lizzie turned to Dash. "What about you, Dash?" the lioness asked. "Do you know?"

Dash blinked in surprise at their unchallenging tone and the fact that they weren't calling him *freak*, but shook his head. "Saderia and I are trying to find out, but we don't have any idea what's bothering Loki and Lisa."

"And we're as worried as you," Saderia added. "I've never seen Loki like this."

"I know," Lily spoke up beside Lizzie. "Loki usually calls us hypocrites or pigs or something. What happened to that?"

Saderia just shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe my parents have heard something about it since it seems to be all the leopards who are acting weird."

Lizzie narrowed her eyes at the mention of her powerful parents, but only said, "Well, tell us if you know."

"I will," Saderia said, surprising herself. She was actually getting along with the L's? It seemed strange, but it seemed like everyone could sense that there was something wrong. Maybe that was why they were getting along: in case something bad happened.

Saderia watched the L's begin to turn and walk away then froze when an electric current shot up her spine. Her eyes widened with shock as a sudden flash of fear, confusion, and worry overwhelmed her, the feelings so strong she almost stumbled to the ground. The terrifying feelings coursed through her body and her eyes opened wide with shock. The recess field around her seemed to disappear, leaving her with a hollow feeling of hopelessness and alarm. Slowly the blackness around her began to fade and her surroundings gradually began to return to her. Glancing around wildly, she breathed a sigh when the feelings began to die away, leaving her only with a sense of dread in the pit of her stomach.

She jumped at the sound of a soft voice beside her and whirled around then let out a sigh of relief when she realized it was only Dash.

He frowned and studied her frightened expression. "Are you okay?"

Saderia nodded shakily. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just my instinct bugging me again."

Dash's amber eyes were instantly serious. "What did you...sense?"

She shook her head. "I only felt this...rush of fear. I think it had to do with Loki and I...I think my instinct is trying to tell me that something really bad is about to happen." As she spoke, she felt the awful feeling of dread grow stronger, warning her that her prediction was right. She felt her heart beat faster with alarm, wondering what could possibly happen and fearing it had something to do with the leopards.

Dash gave her a curious glance. "Is that it? What bad thing is going to happen?"

Saderia could only shake her head. "I don't know."

The dark warning nagged at the back of Saderia's mind all throughout the day, making it even harder to focus as she drifted through her usual classes. When at last she found herself back in Ms. Spot's room at the end of the day, she let out a sigh of relief. Feeling almost exhausted, she padded to the back of the room to pack up her supplies and get ready to go home. Catching Dash's brief amber gaze, she could tell he felt as relieved as she did.

Once she had finally zipped up her book bag, she padded to the front of the room beside Dash and slumped heavily down in her chair, hoping the bell would ring soon. As her eyes restlessly followed the hands of the clock, she couldn't help but glance over at Loki and feel a flash of curiosity when she heard her murmur something to Lisa. When Loki turned back to face the front, Saderia found herself leaning over to whisper quietly to Loki, "Since when do you and Lisa hang out together?"

Loki just shrugged, her usually bright green eyes troubled. "Since she stood up to the L's. Since we live in the same neighborhood."

Saderia felt a tingle of surprise before she nodded and turned back to Dash. She jumped when the bell finally rang and watched as the students all around her leapt to their paws and began crowding around the door, eager to get home.

Saderia waited until most of the students had already left to avoid being pushed around by the excited crowd before standing up with Dash and padding silently out of the room. She looked back once and realized with a feeling of unease that Loki hadn't even bothered to get up. The last thing Saderia saw before she was paraded away by the few remaining students was Loki's sad, anxious face as she faced the task of going home to a place she feared more than anything.

"Do you think Karenisha and Makero know what's going on with the leopards?" Dash asked as they padded silently down the dirt path, too worried to enjoy the deceitfully peaceful swaying of trees around them.

Saderia shrugged, her gaze distant but hopeful. "Maybe. They're King and Queen, so I hope so."

"Me too," Dash agreed, looking uncomfortable. He hesitated. "Do you think you'll have any Dreams?"

Saderia hadn't thought about that yet, but it sent a shiver down her spine when she realized that if there really was a problem in the forest she might start having the strange, prophetic Dreams that used to haunt her sleep. She winced and looked down uncomfortably. Some of the Dreams she had were very vivid and almost painful, but she knew they could help her understand the problem...provided she could decode them.

"I'll help you figure them out if you have them," Dash offered, interpreting her uneasy expression.

Saderia gave him a grateful glance. "Thanks, Dash. My Dreams might be helpful this time if I can just figure them out." Her eyes glittered with appreciation; she had had lots of problems dealing with the Dreams and the prophecy and Dash's help was something she really needed.

Dash smiled back at her. "No problem."

Saderia flicked him happily with her tail as they padded along the dirt path. Their eyes lit up with hope when they spotted their secluded royal home rising up above the trees. The two bounded forward, stopping only to throw open the heavy door before racing into the front room of the house, their paws clicking against the smooth wood floor. Saderia looked up and spotted her parents sitting in the living room, their backs turned to them. Gesturing for Dash to follow, she padded through the gilded archway and slunk around the golden table. She looked up when their paws touched the soft carpet covering the living room.

"Mom? Dad?" The two tigers looked up at the sound of their daughter's voice and smiled when they noticed the two standing in the archway to the living room.

"Saderia, Dash," Karenisha greeted them, giving them a tight smile. She scooted closer to Makero and patted the empty spot on the dark couch, indicating for them to sit.

As the two padded into the living room, Saderia looked up and noticed Cia and Uncle Jash sitting in the two chairs on either side of the living room. Her aunt and uncle welcomed her with weak smiles when she waved at them. She felt a tingle of unease as she and Dash took their places on the couch beside Karenisha and Makero, noticing the grave expressions on the faces of her family members.

"What's going on?" she asked cautiously, glancing anxiously around the room.

“Yeah, you all seem kind of concerned,” Dash agreed with a curious look around at the others.

Karenisha let out a long sigh. “It’s always stressful when the kingdom is worried about something.”

“Does this have anything to do with the leopards?” Saderia guessed softly.

The Queen nodded. “Did you talk to Loki today?”

“Yes, but she wouldn’t tell me much. Do you know what it’s about?”

“The leopards have told us there’s a disturbance around their home, but no one knows much about it,” Makero explained. “They said that there is something going on in Twisted Creek Woods, the woods surrounding the neighborhood known as the Home of the Leopards.”

“The leopards have heard some strange noises,” Cia put in. “We aren’t sure whether they’re making a big deal out of nothing, but they seemed worried, so we sent out a group of animals to check it out.”

“I get a bad feeling about it,” Karenisha murmured softly, her amber gaze distant. “Although I don’t know if that means anything since my Dream sense isn’t so great.”

“Why don’t you ask Saderia?” Uncle Jash suggested.

“What exactly is going on?” Saderia asked, wanting to get the whole story before she started making any predictions.

“Well,” her uncle began, “the leopards came to our home and told us that they had heard a lot of strange, loud noises coming from the woods surrounding the neighborhood, ones they’d never heard before. I don’t know what the big deal is, but we decided to send a few animals out into the woods to check it out and see if they could find anything dangerous in there.” Turning to Karenisha and Makero, he added, “But it really didn’t seem like that big of a deal.”

Karenisha narrowed her eyes. “I told you I have a bad feeling about it. And I *will* ask Saderia.” She turned to her daughter with amber eyes that seemed to bore into her skin. “Saderia, what do you think?”

Saderia hesitated for a long moment before murmuring, “I talked to Loki and I felt uneasy, as if I was being warned about something, but I haven’t had any Dreams yet. I’ll tell you if I have any tonight.”

“Well, I guess that would be helpful, but don’t stress yourself out about it,” Karenisha told her gently.

Makero’s green eyes were worried. “I don’t have your royal family’s Dream sense, but I could still see the worry in those leopards’ eyes. Something has definitely got them spooked.”

“We saw how worried and unhappy Loki was today,” Dash spoke up. “She didn’t seem like herself and neither did Lisa or Ms. Spot, the other leopards in our class. I think something really bad is going on.”

“If you ask me, you’re all worrying yourselves over nothing, but I guess it never hurts to be safe,” Uncle Jash put in with a light shrug of his shoulders.

“He’s got a point. What do you think it could possibly be?” Cia asked, turning to Karenisha. “If it is anything.”

Karenisha shook her head. “I don’t know. Their descriptions didn’t help me think of what it could be but...”

She looked about to say more, but all of a sudden there was a sharp knock on the door. All six of them looked up and waited impatiently as Karenisha called, “Come in!”

Almost immediately, one leopard, one tigress, and one cougar threw open the door and padded rapidly over to where the King, the Queen, and the others were sitting. The three animals bowed carefully before the cougar stepped forward and explained, “We’ve returned from Twisted Creek Woods.”

“Good. What have you got to report?” Karenisha asked eagerly.

The tigress was the one who spoke up, her eyes clear and calm as she told them, “We didn’t find any creature roaming around in Twisted Creek Woods, Queen Karenisha, and we didn’t hear any of the sounds the leopards reported.”

“They’ll be back,” the leopard muttered darkly, looking down at his paws as he stood anxiously on the other side of the tigress.

“Hateko, you’re worrying about nothing,” the cougar said with an impatient sigh.

“Am I?” Hateko replied. He turned to the tigress, his spotted tail twitching nervously back and forth. “Tell them what we found,” he prompted.

The tigress glanced at him before turning back to face Karenisha and Makero. “We did find some disturbing things,” she admitted. “There was blood on the ground in a few areas of the woods. It was just beginning to dry. But there could have been some sort of fight or scuffle. Occasionally, the woods animals—you know, deer and squirrels and such—fight, so it could have been something they did.”

“There was a *lot* of blood!” Hateko interrupted.

“There was,” the tigress acknowledged irritably. “I still don’t think it’s that horrible. Just keep your eyes open for any fights and you’ll be fine.”

“Tell them about the other stuff,” Hateko pressed, narrowing his eyes. “Never mind, I’ll tell them.”

“I’ll tell them,” the tigress interrupted with a growl, giving the leopard a glare before glancing back at the King and Queen. “The grass was trampled and it did seem like something bigger or heavier than a deer and lighter than one of us trampled it, but the area could have simply been worn down over time. There were footprints in the dirt in some areas, as well. The footprints of deer, of course, but also bigger, stranger footprints.”

“I’ve never seen anything like them,” Hateko told them, interrupting the tigress. “They were so strange. They looked like they had some sort of weird pattern... It’s hard to describe, but they had a very strange shape where the front part was longer and more rounded and the back part was shorter. The prints had sunk into the ground pretty far, too, so it must have been something heavy. And the trees were damaged...”

“Yes, the trees...” the cougar spoke up with a hostile glare at Hateko. “I’ll admit, it was definitely strange. In some places, some of the bark on the trees was, well, it almost looked as if it had been blown off by something powerful and there were holes in the tree that didn’t look like they had been made by a woodpecker or another animal. Some trees were damaged pretty badly. It *was* odd, but...”

“It was odd,” Hateko stopped him. “And dangerous looking.”

“But...” the tigress put in, “no matter what did all that, all the signs were old and we’re pretty sure that whatever did it is gone now.”

“It’ll be back,” Hateko muttered mutinously, but he was ignored by the others.



“Thank you for the report,” Karenisha told them graciously, choosing to ignore their bickering. “You three may leave now. We’ll need some time to think about this to decide what to do next.”

“As you wish,” the tigress replied before curtsying and walking out of the house with the cougar fast on her heels.

Hateko lingered. “There really is something out there,” he told them desperately. “You have to do something about it. I think it could really hurt all the leopards. And I don’t think it’ll stop there either.”

“We understand your concern, Hateko,” Karenisha said gently. “We’ll do all we can to figure out what to do about this once we know more about it. Right now, just stay safe. And give my congratulations to your wife, by the way.”

“That’s what I’m worried about!” he burst out. “My wife, Marlina, is pregnant now and if that *thing* is running around...!”

“We’ll see to it the best we can,” Makero told him. “You may go back to the Home of the Leopards now.”

Hateko sighed, thanked them for trying to help, then left the house with the typical bow of respect.

The family sat in silence for a long moment until Karenisha and Makero slowly climbed off the couch and headed toward the dining room, saying they needed to think about what they had just heard on their own. Karenisha paused in the archway of the living room and turned around to face Saderia. “This could be dangerous,” she told her sternly. “Don’t get any ideas.” She gave her a hard look. “Do you promise to stay out of trouble?”

Saderia paused then nodded gingerly, suddenly annoyed that her mother could read her thoughts because of her Dream sense. Cia and Uncle Jash quickly followed the King and Queen, telling their niece and nephew not to worry about it and to let the adults deal with it. Karenisha wasn’t around at the moment to tell Cia not to talk down to her like that and Saderia felt a flash of resentment at being treated like a stupid little kid again. She exchanged a glance with Dash before leading him to her room, muttering, “Come on, Dash. Apparently we’re too stupid to get involved with this.”

Dash said nothing and simply followed Saderia down the right hallway to her room. Saderia remained silent as she seethed over what Cia

had said, but when they reached her room and sat down on her blue bed, she let out a sigh and murmured, "This is my forest, too. I'm not going to just ignore this."

"Me neither," Dash agreed. "Not if animals are in trouble."

"We should think about this, too," Saderia told him. "It's the least we can do, right?"

Dash nodded and they sat in silence for a long moment, thinking about the evidence they had been told of and trying desperately to think of some creature that could do those kinds of things. After what felt like ages, Saderia finally let out a sigh of defeat when she realized she was unable to sense anything except a creepy feeling of dread. "It would be better if I had seen this stuff for myself, not just heard about it" Saderia muttered.

Dash glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Are you implying...?"

"Mom said to stay away," Saderia pointed out, although she was silently yearning to go to the woods to find out just what it was that was scaring the leopards so much. She tried to ignore those thoughts. After all, it would be dangerous and she knew that if she went there, Dash would follow her. The last thing she wanted was for him to get hurt.

"Right," Dash replied, sounding a little relieved. "But in the meantime, how are we supposed to just go on with normal life with all of this going on?"

"I don't know." Saderia lashed her fluffy orange tail in frustration. "We can try to get some information from Loki on Monday and listen to Mom and Dad, but other than that... It's so frustrating! I have this really bad feeling that something awful is happening and I don't know what to do about it."

Dash couldn't understand the anxiety Saderia was feeling since he didn't have her Dream sense. He frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Saderia shook her head. "It's hard to explain." A flicker of fear crept into her amber gaze. "All I can tell you is that something horrible is going to happen."

Fear clawed at her belly along with a hollow sense of not only hunger but also helplessness and loss. There was a roar in the background

that sounded like that of some horrible monster, but when Saderia listened closely, she realized that it was the wailing of all the animals in the forest, their desperate cries pained, terrified, grieving. One wail sounded above the rest: a roar of intense suffering followed by the agonized, grieving wails of the animals around him. There was a loud Crack! somewhere in the distance and her vision of the dying forest was spattered red with blood.

Suddenly the forest disappeared and she found herself in a dark, empty place that she could just barely make out. Through the blurry darkness, she heard a loud, agonized howl: "Claw!" The howl echoed in her mind as her scared amber eyes gazed out into the bleak nothingness of the barren land around her.

Suddenly growls erupted from somewhere in the distance. A forest appeared out of nowhere, glimmering on the horizon as if baiting her toward a wonderful new life she was unable to resist. Her eyes widening with hope and desperation, Saderia felt herself lunge toward it, only to let out a shriek of pain when something grabbed her and dragged her back. Its rough claws scraped against her stinging body, leaving a bright red stain across the dark, colorless land. In a matter of moments, the strange, distant forest had disappeared and her face was once again spattered with blood until the only thing she could see was an agonizing stream of scarlet...

"Saderia!"

Saderia's eyes flew open and she let out a gasp as confusion clouded her drowsy gaze. Her puzzlement quickly turned to sheer terror when she felt paws on her shoulders shaking her almost roughly. Her heart skipped a beat when she found herself staring into two wide amber eyes. She let out a cry of fear and shoved her attacker away, leaping to her paws and pausing only when she recognized the dark brown fur of the animal she had pushed to the ground. Her ears twitched and a sheepish blush crept over her face when she recognized the voice of the animal below her as he let out a muted groan.

She blinked several times and peered over the side of the bed, her gaze locking on two alarmed amber eyes below her. "Dash?" she exclaimed.

The lion pulled himself to his paws and cautiously looked up at her. "Saderia?"

Saderia opened her mouth to speak, but a sudden rush of panic forced her to leap down and confront Dash with wide, scared eyes. “What’s going on? Is the forest okay?” she demanded. “Where am I?”

Dash tipped his head to the side in confusion. “The forest is fine,” he said slowly. “You’re in your bedroom, same as when you went to bed. Everything’s fine, Saderia.” He paused and his eyes widened, showing a mixture of concern, wonder, hope, and fear. “Did you have a Dream?”

Saderia blinked a few times and gazed nervously around her bedroom, relaxing when she recognized her soft bed and remembered the comforting light blue room around her. She realized uncomfortably that she *had* had a Dream, a very vivid, painful Dream. Like her other Dreams, it had felt much realer than an ordinary nightmare, but she had never had a Dream that had hurt so bad. With a shiver, she remembered how she had felt as if she could have drowned in all that blood. *Blood...*

A horrible premonition came over Saderia and she had to fight to push away a tide of panic. “Yes, I-I had a Dream,” she stammered, her voice high with fear. “And I think we’re all in danger.”

Dash shivered, feeling himself go cold. “What was it about?”

Saderia quickly told him the horrible details of her Dream, trying to stop herself from shuddering in fear as she recalled all the sadness, loss, and blood she had seen. Something terrible was definitely about to happen.

Dash looked horrified when she had finished. “What does it all mean?” he whispered. “How can we stop it?”

Saderia shook her head. “I don’t know what it means, but we have to do something. And that starts with finding out just what this is all about.” She glanced at her paws then looked directly at Dash, her amber eyes filled with determination. “We have to see for ourselves what’s troubling the leopards and what’s going on in the woods if we ever hope to save the forest. This weekend we’re going to Twisted Creek Woods!”

# Chapter Three

## Never-Ending Cycle

“Hey, loser! Get up!” Dingo awoke instantly when a rough, red paw prodded his side and let out a yelp as he rolled away from Rip.

“Get off me,” he growled, struggling to his paws and trying to shake off his morning drowsiness. His furry tail lashed back and forth in annoyance. “And I’m not a loser so stop calling me that!”

Rip snorted. “We’ve been calling you names for years. Entertainment is about the only thing you’re good for. Now are you coming or not? Bone’s going to be mad if we’re late for his hunting party.”

Dingo sighed. “We’re going hunting with Bone?”

“And Tear. And Rock.”

Dingo sighed with a slight growl. “Great. All my favorite dingoes.”

Rip’s yellow eyes narrowed in amusement. “Well, you know Bone. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting. Oh, and lose the attitude. We don’t need a storm cloud following us.”

Dingo sighed and sulkily followed Rip out of the tiny, rock den as he led him across the camp to meet up with Bone, Rock, and Tear, who were all waiting by the pile of bones that marked the entrance to the dingo camp. All three of them were looking out at the vast, empty expanse of desert they were so familiar with, their eyes glinting in the sunlight.

“It’s about time,” Bone growled, turning around when Dingo walked up to them.

“Why do we have to hunt with the freak?” Rock muttered, glaring at him.

“To watch him fail, of course,” Bone growled with a superior look at Dingo. Dingo just stared coldly back at the Second in Command, not saying a word. When the silence lasted for more than a minute, Bone simply sneered at him and snarled, “You know we’re waiting for you to slip up and fail, Dingo, so we can exile you.”

“I’m aware of that, Bone,” Dingo growled. “But if I miss one stupid bit of prey, is that really grounds to make me an outcast?”

“I guess not,” Bone admitted. “But if you miss two, it will be.” His amber eyes gleamed in the desert sunlight.

Dingo just snorted and pushed past the dark brown-black dingo. Bone glared and quickly stepped after him, pushing ahead of him so that he was in the lead. Dingo rolled his eyes, aware of the fact that Bone always needed to feel in charge as he fell into step beside him along with Rip and Tear. Rock pushed ahead so that he was right beside Bone, his dark brown eyes glinting with superiority since he loved being in charge just as much as his powerful friend.

Briefly it bothered Dingo that he had to go along with his brothers and Rock after what three of them had done to him yesterday, but he was used to having to act like everything was fine, that nothing had changed. He wasn’t exactly in a position to protest anyway.

As the sun crept higher in the sky, Bone led the large group of dingoes around the sand dunes until they spotted a small piece of prey racing across the desert floor. He flicked his tail toward it. “What do you think, Dingo? Think you can catch that?”

“Stop testing me,” Dingo muttered as he darted after it, moving just quick enough to catch it. He grimaced. He didn’t like to hunt, but it was the only way to survive in the desert.

With a sigh, he quickly padded back to Bone and Rock, narrowing his eyes in annoyance when he reached them. “Was that good enough, your Greatness?”

“‘Your Greatness’,” Bone tried, his tone frosty and unaffected. “I like it. You can keep calling me that from now on.”

“Learn the meaning of sarcasm,” Dingo muttered under his breath as he fell back behind them. Bone narrowed his eyes, but kept moving, catching the next piece of prey with ease.

“I’ll tell you what, brother,” Bone growled when he paused and caused the group to halt in the middle of the desert. “I’m sick of hunting. Why don’t you catch all the food for us?”

Dingo flattened his ears. “Bone, I don’t want to—”

“That’s an order,” Bone growled, sneering at him. Dingo growled; Bone had loved showing his authority as Second in Command ever since he

got the title a year ago.

Dingo narrowed his eyes, but then just looked down, muttering, "Fine, Bone."

Bone sneered at him and continued leading the dingoes, occasionally pointing out a piece of prey and commanding Dingo to catch it for them. Dingo hated acting like their slave, but he didn't really have a choice; if he protested, they would just gang up on him and attack him.

As they walked, Rock glanced at Bone and growled, "When are you going to get rid of the pack Leader so you can be Leader and I can be Second in Command?"

Bone rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Not now, Rock. You're really starting to get on my nerves."

"Well, I'm sick of waiting to be Second in Command. Your Dad's been in charge for way too long."

"I'll kill him later. It's not like he ever does anything anyway. As far as the pack is concerned, *I* rule them."

Rock's dark brown eyes were not amused. "You might rule the pack, but I don't. You promised I'd be Second in Command when you became Leader and I'm sick of waiting."

Bone let out an annoyed snarl. "Don't be such a baby."

Rock just rolled his eyes and didn't respond as he followed Bone and the others over the next sand dune.

Dingo raised his eyebrows at them. "Do you two really need to discuss this in front of everyone?" He wasn't too worried about what they said since everyone talked about killing, especially killing someone with power. Not that it didn't happen, but Dingo didn't think his brother was serious about killing anybody. Bone was cruel to him, but as far as Dingo knew, he wasn't a murderer...

Bone just snorted. "Shut up, loser, and focus on catching me something decent to eat. My stomach is growling."

Dingo simply rolled his eyes and kept walking.

After a few moments of padding through the hot, sandy desert, Bone had managed to insult him at least twenty times. At least he was good at his hobby. For his twenty-first taunt, he growled, "Can't you catch anything worth eating? Like..."

"Forest food?" Rip suggested, looking up with an eager smile.

Bone grinned. "Yeah, forest food. Why don't you go into those weird forests and catch me a lion or panther or whatever those things are called."

"I could sure go for some forest food right now," Rip laughed.

Dingo rolled his eyes at them. "Have either of you even *seen* forest food?" he muttered.

"Who cares?" Rip growled. "We probably will someday. They'll probably wander out of their precious forest and into the desert eventually. After all, the forests are right on the edge of the desert."

"I'd like to attack a...what was it? A tiger?" Rock growled.

"Same here," Bone agreed with an evil glint in his amber eyes. "Although it'd probably be an easy kill."

Dingo bit back an angry retort about how sick they were, not wanting to single himself out as the freaky different dingo again.

"Lions sound kind of tough. They might put up a good fight," Rip said thoughtfully.

"They might be a decent challenge," Bone agreed, not wanting to be outdone by Rip. Before Rip could reply, Bone growled, "Never mind. We're done here. Let's go back to camp." He flicked his tail to signal for them to follow him back as the dark dingo bounded away through the sand dunes. Dingo just followed them with a long sigh.

When they returned to the dingo camp, Bone took *all* of his food, so for the rest of the day Dingo went hungry, but he didn't care. He was used to the dingoes coming up with any reason to torment him by now. He ignored Bone taunting him when he said he hoped he starved to death. It hurt a little bit, but he was past being upset that his oldest brother hated him.

As the day passed by, he went on with his normal life, ignoring the taunts of the pack members and their brief, half-hearted attacks. After receiving a light wound from a pack member who had randomly taken a swipe at him when he walked by, he retreated to his den to avoid them.

Dingo slumped down in his den, but before he could close his eyes to rest and block out the noise of the dingoes, he was startled by the sound of paw steps shuffling against the sandy floor. Glancing up out of the corner of his eyes, he sighed when he saw Rip standing just a few feet away, watching him. After several moments of this, Dingo finally turned around



to glare at him irritably. "So you've apparently got nothing better to do than stare at me, right?"

Rip narrowed his eyes and growled then frowned thoughtfully. "I don't get you," he said, sounding confused.

"No one does," Dingo pointed out.

"Yeah, for a reason." He paused. "Why don't you ever fight back when someone attacks you? You just...take it. It's weird; it's not natural. So why do you do it?"

Dingo sighed. "Because I actually have some control over my emotions, unlike the rest of you, and I know that fighting is wrong."

Unnoticeably rolling his eyes, Dingo watched as Rip frowned at him in obvious incomprehension, as if he had no idea how anyone could think fighting was a bad thing. Unlike Rip, Dingo had always known that hurting someone else was wrong and that in the long run it didn't help anyone because it would always come back to haunt them.

Nonetheless, Dingo knew very well *how* to fight and win; his sister had been tough and strong and she had taught him. Even so, all of the other dingoes thought of him as weak, stupid, and helpless and guessed he would go down easily in a fight because he was different and because he was scrawny and usually a bit unkempt.

Dingo tried not to let it bother him. After all, if he ever had to really fight for his life, it would be best if his attacker thought he was weak because they might not put as much effort into the fight as they would for a more threatening opponent. Dingo hoped he would never have to fight for his life, but he had a feeling it was inevitable.

Rip snorted and Dingo jumped out of his thoughts. "Fighting is not wrong," Rip said. "You are."

Dingo just sighed. "Whatever you say, Rip."

As the piercing yellow sun drifted closer to the horizon later in the day, Dingo crawled out of his empty den and looked around at his surroundings. Around camp dingoes were going about their daily business, chatting with each other as they returned from hunting and eating together as they laughed about the day's events. Bone and Rock were growling about something by Bone's den and Rip and Tear were arguing about nothing near

the water trough. Dingo turned away from the everyday camp activities as he stepped out from his den.

Wordlessly, he padded toward the entrance of the camp, his tail twitching when he saw Bone shoot him a dangerous glare out of the corner of his eyes. Ignoring the stare of his older brother, Dingo paced past the piles of bones marking the camp's entrance. He glanced up at the sun as he padded out into the endless sand dunes, trying to determine how long he should stay out before returning to camp. Shaking the thoughts away and hoping to be alone for a while, Dingo padded onward, not really knowing or caring where he was going. Glancing back, he tried to shake away thoughts of Bone and the pack as he kept moving. With a sigh, he slowly began to relax, only to freeze and let out a gasp when he turned around and saw what lay ahead.

His eyes widened in shock and every muscle in his body tensed as he stared out at the most dreaded place in the desert. Right in front of him stretched a large, pitch black chasm that seemed to split the desert in half. The dark abyss was so deep nobody could see the bottom even if they wanted to and so wide it seemed to go on for miles on both sides. It was the bane of the desert. Dingo swallowed hard in fear and silently snapped at himself for not paying attention and almost stepping right into the chasm known as the Snake Pit.

Every dingo in the desert knew that the Snake Pit was deadly. The evil snakes that lived down there preyed on the dingoes that were unfortunate enough to fall into the deep chasm...or get pushed. The snakes were cruel killers and every dingo learned from the time they were born to avoid the Snake Pit. Stories had been passed on for centuries about the dangers lurking in the blackness below; as the stories went, the snakes either ate their prey alive or let them die of poison from their venomous fangs. There was no way to escape the pit as far as the pack knew, so if someone fell they would be trapped down there where millions of snakes could surround and eat them. The fall would have already crippled them so they wouldn't be able to get away. Just the thought of the Snake Pit was enough to make some of the toughest dingoes in the pack shudder.

Dingo immediately began backing away from the dreaded Snake Pit, keeping his eyes on the pitch black stripe of the abyss as though it would rear up and attack if he looked away. As soon as it was out of sight,

he let out the breath he had been holding and started walking in another direction, trying to assuage the shivers racing up his spine.

When he finally managed to shake off the scare he had received, he walked carefully onward, ignoring the tiny prickles of fear tickling his shaky paws. As he walked, he wondered how he had accidentally wandered over to the Snake Pit. It was a built-in instinct ingrained in every dingo's mind to avoid the area at all costs. Usually he could do that without even thinking about it. Shaking his head, Dingo guessed he had simply gone the wrong way by mistake, although there seemed to be something strange, almost supernatural, about the occurrence. It was almost as if some instinct had led him there for a reason...but that was crazy unless the supernatural itself was trying to kill him like everyone else. Stumbling onto the Snake Pit was merely an unfortunate coincidence and nothing else.

After casting one last wary glance back at the abyss, Dingo turned and began bounding off in the direction opposite the awful chasm, shaking off any remaining fear. He wanted to go to a secret den he had hidden years ago from the pack so that he could have some alone time and he wasn't about to let an accidental run-in with the Snake Pit ruin his time away from the pack. As he stepped gingerly through the desert, padding past cactuses and over sand dunes, Dingo let out a long sigh. He barely needed to focus on the seemingly endless landscape because he knew the way through the desert by heart and had the path to his secret den memorized. Letting his head droop lazily against his chest, he didn't bother to pay attention to where he was going.

He paused only when he heard rough, hushed voices sound from behind a nearby sand dune. Freezing in alarm, Dingo's head shot up and he glanced rapidly back and forth across the empty desert. He whirled around just in time to see Bone and Rock burst out from behind a large dune. His eyes widened in surprise and his muscles tensed to run. He had always found it best to avoid being alone with those two; something about it just didn't feel safe to him even if Bone was his brother. Either way, Dingo already knew that even if he fled they would follow him. With a sigh, he sat back and stayed put, watching them warily as they darted toward him.

"Dingo?" Bone called when he and Rock caught up to him, their eyes gleaming in the dying light. "All alone out here?"

“Just thought I’d do some hunting on my own,” Dingo told him as the two of them padded toward him. Dingo tried to be friendly even though it was no use with Bone. “Um...so how is it being Second in Command?”

Bone narrowed his amber eyes and smirked. “I can make the whole pack bow to me, that’s how it is.”

Dingo’s eyes flashed before he turned away. “Interesting,” he muttered, trying not to let his voice slip into sarcasm. He didn’t like the way Bone was staring at him so he decided to try another conversation tactic, something Bone was always interested in. “Any good fights lately?”

Bone glanced at him out of the corner of his eyes as the three of them started walking through the desert in a random direction. “Yeah, I beat this one dingo the other day and Rip, too, which was easy.” He gave Dingo a cold look. “But you can stop pretending like you’re interested.”

Dingo sighed. “At least I’m trying to be friendly, Bone. Can’t you at least try to get along with me?”

Bone snorted and let out a scornful laugh. “Why should I give you my approval? You’re worthless and I’d be a lot happier if you were exiled from the pack.”

“I’m not looking for your *approval*. I just want to try to get along with my brother. Is that really too much to ask?”

“You have no right to ask for anything, *different* dingo.”

Dingo let out a long, frustrated breath. “Just because I’m *different*... Never mind, you never listen to me.”

“Give me one good reason why I should,” Bone retorted.

Dingo rolled his eyes. “We’re brothers, Bone. Don’t you have any loyalty?”

“Yeah, for the pack and the pack alone, not freaks like you. And as for us being *brothers*, I’d prefer if we could just forget about that. It’s bad enough being related to Claw without having to be related to you, too.”

Dingo looked at him in shock, wondering how Claw had slipped into the conversation before unconsciously letting out a low growl. “Don’t talk about Claw like that,” he snapped. “She’s our *sister*!”

Bone sneered at him. “I’ll talk about her all I want. She’s dead, so why should it matter?”

Dingo growled and turned away. “We weren’t talking about Claw. Let’s get off the subject.”

“Let’s not,” Bone replied. “While we’re still on the subject, you should know that it’s your fault she’s dead.”

“And the whole pack knows it, too,” Rock put in from Bone’s side, obviously not caring that this could be considered a *family matter*.

Dingo winced and turned away from them, his brown tail dragging against the ground. He still didn’t know how the conversation had gotten here, but he did know that every time Bone talked about Claw, he ended up feeling worse than ever. Pain surged through his body as he was forced to think again of the night she died. The worst part was that Bone was right: it was his fault.

Bone’s amber eyes gleamed. Leaning closer, he added, “But don’t feel bad, Dingo. You did the pack a favor by letting her die.”

Dingo’s head shot up to stare at Bone in disbelief.

“Claw deserved to die,” Bone told him. “She...”

“How can you say that?” Dingo shouted, turning on him furiously, already on the brink of tears. Bone had insulted Claw before, but he had never come right out and said something like that.

“She was different,” Bone said simply. “Like you. She believed fighting was wrong and that I was evil. All different dingoes deserve to die, you included. Claw was nothing but weak and stupid and she thought she could change the pack and make us give up our ‘cruel’ ways.” Dingo felt sick when Bone actually started laughing as he said the word ‘cruel’ in such a patronizing way. As if Claw had been an ignorant little pup for thinking that. As if he pitied her for being so ignorant.

Bone’s laugh turned sour. “Any dingo in camp would agree she deserved to die for that.”

Dingo stood frozen to the spot, his tail lashing as he struggled to resist the urge to rip Bone to shreds. “Don’t talk about Claw,” he snarled. “Don’t even say her name.”

Bone sneered at Dingo. “I’m glad Claw’s dead,” he whispered. “And I’m glad she suffered before she died.”

Dingo blinked a few times before forcefully turning away from Bone, trying to ignore the fury burning in his chest and feeling miserable when his own sadness kept his anger from getting the best of him. He already knew attacking Bone would do no good. “Just get out of here,” he muttered. “I don’t want to hear this.”

Bone frowned. "Aren't you going to attack?"

Dingo snorted. "Why? To give you a reason to rip me to shreds? No thanks. I don't fight, remember?"

Bone let out an aggravated snarl. "Worthless idiot," he muttered. The dark dingo rolled his eyes and glanced over his shoulder at Rock before turning and glaring at Dingo. "Attack him!" he shouted.

"What?!" Dingo let out a cry of shock, just barely getting out the word before Bone and Rock leapt on top of him, biting at his throat. Dingo thrashed underneath them, trying to get free, but with two of them it was almost impossible. "Get off me!" he shouted, kicking and biting at them as hard as he could.

Rock sneered at him with evil, dark brown eyes and just laughed.

Bone chuckled too, but his gaze remained cold as he glared at Dingo. "Have fun with your dead sister wherever you end up," he growled as he lunged forward to sink his fangs into Dingo's throat. With a strangled yelp of pain, Dingo struggled to free himself from Bone's deadly grasp, his mind clouding with a haze of blood and pain. Letting out a vicious snarl, Dingo finally tore himself free from Bone's rough grasp and rolled away from him just in time. He leapt frantically to his feet, wondering whether to stay and fight or run back to camp. When the two dark dingoes growled furiously and stalked toward him, he immediately turned to run.

His blood ran cold as he darted away from them and heard Bone snarl to Rock, "Come on. We'll chase him into the Snake Pit."

Dingo glanced behind him in horror; Bone had attacked him before, but he had never seemed this intent on killing him. Bone glared back at him as he gave chase, his amber eyes glinting with cold, undisguised hatred he had never known before. Beginning to feel light-headed with fear and distress, he raced onward, desperate to escape his attackers. Bone had always hated him, but never this much. Shivering in fear, Dingo knew he had to lose them or he would be nothing but a pile of bones for the buzzards to pick at.

He ran faster, keeping low to the sandy ground in the hopes that his brown fur might blend in with the sand. Weaving frantically in between sand dunes, he tried to take them in a confusing, twisting trail to try to lose them. Diving behind a sand dune, he skidded to a halt and pricked his ears, listening for any signs of pursuit. When he heard no hint of his attackers in

the silent desert around him, he finally let out a sigh and let his head droop with relief. His heavy pants began to slow as he continued less urgently to his secret den, staying close to the ground and being quiet just to be safe.

After a while, he stumbled across the large sand dune and carefully leaned down to dig into the sand and reveal a dusty, brown stone. With a brisk flick of his tail, Dingo shoved the stone aside to reveal a small but familiar den built into the side of the sand dune. As he stepped inside, he immediately pulled the stone over the entrance and hoped the sand would hide it from sight.

Trying to relax, he padded gingerly over to a smooth, sand-covered stone sitting at the very back of the den. He flopped heavily down on it, wondering how life had gotten so complicated. Not for the first time, he wondered if he really was just a freak, a dingo who didn't belong. Maybe he was the one that was wrong and Bone and the others were right.

Dingo squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face between his paws. In the long run, it didn't matter who was right and who was wrong. Either way, he was never going to change the dingoes; it was impossible, so why didn't he just give up already? The answer was simple: because he had promised Claw he wouldn't.

The next morning, Dingo awoke in his secret den and slipped out into the desert, kicking sand over the stone entrance to hide it before rushing away toward the dingo camp. When Dingo arrived back at camp, the pack Leader was just leaving. The Leader paused and gave him a cold look. "Well," he growled, "looks like you're back this morning, Dingo. We were all beginning to hope you were dead."

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "Sorry, not today. I'm still breathing," he growled flatly.

The Leader narrowed his yellow eyes and stalked off, muttering, "Oh well."

Dingo just rolled his eyes and paced anxiously into camp. Once he passed the piles of bones marking the entrance, Dingo's light brown eyes immediately sought out Bone, who was sitting with Rock and Rip by the dark, gaping entrance of the Second in Command's den. Dingo's nervous gaze lingered on the cold Second in Command. Bone didn't look like he

had the last time Dingo had seen him: hateful and eager for bloodshed. Now he just looked like he normally did: arrogant and cold, but not murderous.

Maybe Bone hadn't been trying to kill him; after all, they were brothers and that had to count for something. Bone had attacked him so often it had become routine and last time was probably nothing more than another casual fight between them; it was probably just paranoia that made Dingo uneasy. Bone had simply been trying to hurt him, not kill him... Trying to shrug off the memories of yesterday, Dingo slipped gingerly into his den to try to relax even as his tail twitched nervously back and forth. He pricked his ears, unconsciously listening for any sound of warning or attack.

As he tensely laid down on the sandy floor, he suddenly noticed someone standing in the entrance to the den. Turning, he froze when he saw Bone towering over him, his dark brown fur black against the bright light of the sun. Trying to seem nonchalant even as every instinct screamed for him to run, Dingo said, "Hi, Bone. What are you doing here?"

Bone glared at him for a long moment then growled, "Everybody hates you, Dingo. Everyone in the pack wants you dead." Stalking closer to him so that he was less than an inch away, Bone snarled, "I'm going to make your pathetic life miserable."



# Chapter Four

## Twisted Creek Woods

A dark storm seemed to gather in the normally peaceful forest as the rest of the week trudged on. Soon it was impossible to ignore the ominous cloud of unrest hanging over the leopards and spreading to the rest of the forest. As Saderia moved restlessly through the slow, anxious days, she found her gaze drawn to Loki and the other leopards. A tingle of unease shivered down her spine when she noticed the dark bags under their eyes and the fear in their dull, listless gazes. By Saturday she was sure that something awful was about to happen...or had already happened. Her heart burned with determination to understand what was terrorizing her forest.

Karenisha and Makero had been doing all they could to figure out what was lurking in Twisted Creek Woods, but each time they went to investigate, they found nothing but blood and damaged trees, making it clear that whatever was there *hadn't* left. The leopards living by Twisted Creek Woods were becoming even more afraid. In the last two days of school, Loki and Lisa didn't show up, and on the last day, there was a substitute for Ms. Spot. A few of the spotted forest animals claimed to have seen something through the bushes that they could not describe, but none of them had any idea what they were up against. Saderia knew they were suffering and she struggled to figure out what was going on and how she could help.

"Karenisha and Makero are never going to let us go to Twisted Creek Woods," Dash told her when they were alone in her room.

Saderia let out a sigh. She already knew this and unfortunately her plan to get around it left little room for honesty. "When we leave we can just tell them we're going to play in the woods and not say *what* woods," she murmured.

Dash blinked. "So...lie to them?"

"I don't want to," Saderia snapped. "But I really think we should check out Twisted Creek Woods and you know they won't let us if we tell

them. If we do it this way, Mom and Dad will probably just think we'll go play in the woods around our house. We'll be back before they know it. No harm done."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Dash said hesitantly. "I don't even want to go anymore. It's obvious that whatever is in that woods is dangerous."

"I know, but we'll be careful," Saderia pleaded. "Come on, Dash, I have to know what it is."

Dash was silent for a long time. "I want to know, too, but I don't want to put either of us in danger. Besides, Karenisha and Makero will never let us leave the house again once they find out we lied."

"I'm aware of all that, but this seems really important and so far I haven't had any Dreams to warn me away from there. If anything, my instinct is telling me *to go there!*" As she said it, she felt a familiar twinge of fear but also determination when she thought about helping her kingdom find out what was in Twisted Creek Woods.

Dash still didn't look convinced. "But what if you *do* get hurt? Your Dreams can't tell you everything, can they?"

"I don't think that's something they would have left out," Saderia replied a bit dryly. "Look, if something doesn't seem right, we'll go back, all right?"

Dash let out a long sigh. "All right. But we *are* going to be careful."

"Of course. Now come on." Saderia flicked him lightly with her tail before leaping to the floor and trotting resolutely toward the door. She heard Dash let out a sigh as he jumped down behind her and followed her reluctantly down the hallway, past the front room and dining room, and finally into the living room. As the two padded over to stand by the couch where her parents were sitting, Saderia found her gaze drifting to the two chairs on either side of the room, the big mahogany bookshelves beside the chair, and the soft purple carpet below her. Finally she looked up and stared at the stacks of papers in her parents paws labeled "Twisted Creek Woods Reports". She looked around at anything to avoid their weary amber and green gazes when they glanced up at their children.

"Mom, Dad..." She glanced nervously at her paws. "Um...Dash and I want to go play in the woods. Can we?"

Karenisha nodded with a slight smile. “Just don’t go far and be back soon. Have fun.”

Saderia tried to ignore her own guilt as she replied, “We will. Thanks, Mom.”

“Thanks, Karenisha,” Dash added a bit more despondently.

Saderia flicked him warningly with her tail before the two of them walked solemnly toward the door. They closed it carefully behind them and let out sighs of relief when they found themselves alone in the calm green world outside. After exchanging a guilty glance, they both turned and began trotting toward the dirt path that would lead them to town. Their eyes flicked nervously back and forth through the deceptively peaceful woods. As Saderia padded onward with the green woods rising up on either side of the dirt path and the tranquil wind rustling gently through the trees, it seemed as if nothing bad could possibly be happening. Because of the calmness of the rest of the forest, Saderia knew that many of the animals didn’t take the Twisted Creek Woods threat too seriously. She would have passed it off as minor disturbance, as well, if she hadn’t seen the fear in Loki’s eyes and felt such a horrible feeling of dread.

As they walked along, Saderia felt a twinge of disquiet when she read the unease in Dash’s nervous amber gaze. She winced when she recognized her own fears reflected in his anxious expression. After several minutes of walking, Dash turned to face her, his eyes narrowed with worry and curiosity. “What do you think is in there? And why are the leopards making such a big deal about it?”

Saderia shook her head. “I don’t know. But we’re going to find out.”

“Well, that’s a nice thought, but how are we actually going to get into Twisted Creek Woods? I don’t think the leopards will let us go considering we’re just kids.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes in annoyance and growled, “Don’t worry, I have a plan for that, too. But first we’re going to find out a little more about this problem from a friend.”

Dash just nodded obediently as they followed the dirt path into town. They ignored the oblivious chatter of the forest animals as they cut through the grassy clearing and stopped in the center of town. They scanned the worn trails branching off into different areas of the woods, searching for the right one.

As Saderia looked around for the path that would lead them to the Home of the Leopards, she couldn't help but notice that among the throngs of animals moving from store to store, there were no leopards to be seen. Shaking the thoughts from her head, Saderia turned and spotted a small, wooden sign propped up beside one of the more overgrown trails. The sign proclaimed "Spotted Trail - To the Home of the Leopards and Twisted Creek Woods".

Flicking Dash with her tail, Saderia gestured to the sign and began padding toward the dense trail, casting one last glance back at the peaceful town before plunging into the thick of the woods. Her paws stuck to the beaten down trail even as she moved to dodge large roots and clumps of brush. Her eyes darted to the tops of the trees lining the sides of the path. Their thick branches blocked out the light blue sky, making the woods seem unusually dark. Twisted Creek Woods was on the other side of the Home of the Leopards, a good distance away from the overgrown path, but Saderia still couldn't staunch her feelings of unease. The woods around her seemed too quiet, as if anything could shatter the calm in an instant.

Dash glanced nervously through the thick trees on either side of the path as if searching the undergrowth for signs of the unknown enemy. His amber eyes were troubled and serious and Saderia guessed that he was remembering all the details they had learned from the reports her parents had received. She rapidly turned away from him and began searching the woods for any sign of danger. She was determined to keep her guard up and protect her friend.

After several minutes, the trail slowly began to widen. When Saderia squinted through the trees, she was able to make out a few small, brownish houses in the clearing ahead. With a quick glance at Dash, she bounded forward and skidded to a halt when the trees thinned out and a large clearing opened up in front of them. Looking around, she noticed tiny brown houses scattered around the outskirts of the clearing, their wooden doors worn and chipped and their tiny windows dusty and cracked. Belongings were strewn around the outside of their homes, ranging anywhere from old furniture that wouldn't fit to toys that were better to share with the others.

Most of the leopards were hanging around outside, talking and playing together in a way that would seem happy and lighthearted if not for

the dark undercurrent of tension and fear hanging over the clearing. Nobody smiled when they talked and a funny joke quickly turned sour. All of the animals cast glances at the woods at the back of the clearing as if they expected something to jump out from the bushes and attack them at any minute.

As Saderia and Dash stepped hesitantly into the clearing known as the Home of the Leopards, they glanced cautiously around at their surroundings. They looked up in surprise when a broad-shouldered leopard spotted them and padded toward them, holding her head proudly even though her eyes were shadowed with worry. “Welcome to the Home of the Leopards,” she said politely. “I’m Maeta, leader of the leopards, and you are?”

“I’m Saderia, and this is Dash,” Saderia introduced just as politely, nodding courteously to the leopard leader. A lot of places had leaders like Maeta who oversaw their individual neighborhoods to ensure peace. While the King and Queen ruled the whole kingdom, they couldn’t be everywhere in the vast forest at once. They usually appointed a few animals like Maeta to watch over the others.

“The Princess and Prince,” Maeta realized, nodding to Saderia in respect. “I thought I recognized you. What are you doing here?” Her gaze was suddenly hopeful as if she was wondering if the King and Queen had sent them with good news.

Sad to have to ruin her hopes, Saderia reluctantly told her, “The King and Queen are still looking into the problem and they’re analyzing what was found in the woods. We’ve only come to speak to Loki and to tell her what she missed in school. We’ll definitely tell you if my parents have found anything out, though.” Dash watched her closely to see what her plan for getting into Twisted Creek Woods would be and gave her a brief nod when she glanced at him.

Maeta nodded, hiding a soft sigh. “I see. Loki is right over there with Lisa. Tell the King and Queen I appreciate their help in trying to solve the problem.”

“We will,” Dash told her.

Saderia turned to gaze in the direction Maeta had pointed out as the leopard leader turned to walk away. Over by one of the little houses on the farthest edge of the clearing, Loki was talking quietly with Lisa, smiling

every now and then but seeming just as sad and scared as before. Loki and Lisa acting like friends...? Saderia frowned as she watched them, feeling a tingle of confusion and unease slither down her spine.

Shaking her head and struggling to put on a more carefree expression, Saderia bounded off toward Loki and Lisa with Dash fast on her heels. She ignored the curious glances of the leopards as she called their names.

“Loki! Lisa!”

Loki pricked her ears and looked up in surprise when she heard Saderia. The cheetah-leopard frowned. Her green eyes were confused as she and Lisa turned to greet them. “Saderia? Dash? What are you doing here?” she asked.

Lisa faced them curiously though she kept her gray blue eyes focused mainly on her spotted paws. Saderia glanced back and forth between them with questioning eyes until Loki let out a sigh and wearily explained, “We’re friends now since we both live here. She’s actually pretty fun when you get to know her.”

“I’m sorry about being mean to you and Dash,” Lisa added, keeping her gaze trained on the grass beneath them.

“It’s all right, Lisa,” Dash said gently, hiding his surprise. “It really didn’t bother me that much.”

“Yeah, we don’t mind,” Saderia told her. “It’s okay. We can be friends now.”

“Thanks,” Lisa said gratefully. “I didn’t really like what Lizzie and Lily liked and I’m happier being friends with Loki now. She’s more fun. But...” She trailed off and looked down.

“Some things are going on,” Loki finished. “Anyway, what are you doing here?”

Saderia glanced around at the clearing full of leopards. “Actually, we came to talk to you about that. We’ve heard a little bit about what’s been happening in Twisted Creek Woods, but not a lot. Can you tell us exactly what’s been going on?”

Loki sighed unhappily and stared at her paws. “It all started a while ago. The leopards and I heard something heavy tromping around in the woods and this loud sound...this *crack!* somewhere in the distance. It sounded far away when we first heard it, so we didn’t worry about it. We

thought that whatever it was would go away in time.” Loki’s green gaze drifted to look out into Twisted Creek Woods with a mixture of fear and helplessness. “But it didn’t.”

“What happened after that?” Saderia prompted.

It was Lisa who took up the story. “The sounds came closer until this...this loud, horrible Crack came from the forest. It was so loud and scary. It wasn’t like anything we’d ever heard before. All of us went to our houses to hide. We kept hoping it would go away, but as the days passed by, we kept hearing the sound and...” She trailed off, looking terrified.

“Right after the loud crack, we would hear this horrible screech almost every time,” Loki solemnly took up the story. “It sounded like an animal dying.” Saderia shivered at her cold, scared words. “All of the leopards were terrified, but a few went out to try to find out what was happening. All they found was fur and lots of blood. That much blood couldn’t have come from a fight between squirrels or a clash between bucks.”

Saderia stared at her for a long time, feeling terror beginning to creep up her spine. “Then what could have done that?” she demanded.

Loki shook her head. “I don’t know. But something even worse happened after that. A few of the leopards went out to investigate again, but somehow they got separated. We heard that horrible sound again and out of the four leopards that went to look around, only three came back. They explained how they’d split up and that they hadn’t found anything.” Loki paused for a horrible, sad moment. “The other leopard hasn’t been seen since then.”

Saderia felt a great sense of loss and fear cloud her mind, but through the haze of fear, she heard Dash ask, “And what’s Maeta doing about it?”

“The only thing she can. She went to the King and Queen to try to get them to help and she’s doing what she can to protect the leopards by keeping them in their houses. Maeta and her pregnant sister, Marlina, and her brother-in-law, Hateko, are always talking it over and trying to figure out what to do, but they’re just as stumped as the rest of us.” Loki was silent for a long time while Saderia realized that she’d heard the name Marlina before and that she had seen Hateko, the leopard from the group her parents had sent to search the woods. She hadn’t realized they were kin

to the leopard leader. "We also think that this...thing won't just stay in Twisted Creek Woods," Loki said suddenly, tearing Saderia out of her thoughts.

Unease made Saderia's orange fur stand on end as she swallowed hard. "What do you mean?"

Loki looked at her, her green eyes troubled. "I mean, I think the danger is going to spread to the rest of the forest and then none of us will be safe. The whole forest is in serious danger!"

Saderia stared at her for a long, terrifying moment as a horrible sense of dread washed over her. Could the whole forest really be in danger? And was there anything she could do to save her forest and the animals that inhabited it? She exchanged a fearful glance with Dash, who looked just as alarmed and scared. Saderia suddenly had another horrible thought. What if something happened to Dash? She couldn't even imagine life without him and she knew she would do anything to protect him, but if animals were starting to disappear...

Without giving herself time to think about it, she turned desperately to Loki and hissed, "We want to go into Twisted Creek Woods."

Loki's eyes widened. "What? You can't—it's dangerous!"

"I know," Saderia said. "But we have to see this for ourselves. If we're careful, we'll be okay, I think. There's safety in numbers, too. We want to see if we can spot the enemy or if we can find any signs to give us hints as to what's doing this." She paused then added falteringly, "You don't have to come with us..."

"Are you crazy? I'm not letting you go without me!" Loki interrupted, suddenly sounding more animated. "Come on; I'll take you. But if Maeta catches us and considers skinning us alive, you have to take the blame."

"Don't worry, I will," Saderia quickly agreed. "This is important."

"I know it is." Loki turned to Lisa with shining green eyes. "We'll be right back, okay? Don't tell Maeta—you know how serious she is about keeping the leopards out of the woods."

"For good reason, too," Lisa replied, narrowing her eyes. "But don't worry. I won't tell her...because I'm coming with you."

Loki narrowed her eyes. "No."



“Saderia was right when she said that there’s safety in numbers,” Lisa protested. “Four of us would be better than three. I can help you look out for trouble.”

Loki glared at her for a long moment then let out a sigh. “All right, Lisa, you can come and help us keep a look out for the enemy. But no getting lost, no lagging behind, no sudden movements, nothing like that. I don’t like taking Saderia and Dash into that dreaded place much less you, too.”

“I won’t put us in danger,” Lisa told her firmly.

Loki let out a somewhat annoyed breath then rapidly jumped to her paws, flicking her spotted tail as a signal for the three of them to follow her. “Come on,” she growled. “If we want to try to find out what’s in there, I think it would be best to look out over the whole forest to try to spot something. I know this place with a huge boulder called Hillcrest Rock that’s so big you can see almost everything. If you want to find it, then follow me. Dash, keep your tail down, and the rest of you keep low to the ground. We don’t want Maeta or that *thing* lurking in the woods to see us.”

Embarrassed, Dash lowered his dark brown tail while the rest of them crouched down to crawl toward the bushes that marked the edge of the woods. They kept an eye on the leopards around the clearing, as well, to see if they would noticed them sneaking away. They didn’t need to worry, though; the leopards were so preoccupied with looking out into the woods to try to spot the enemy to realize what they were doing.

“Well, the easy part’s over with,” Loki muttered as she crept deeper into the woods, glancing cautiously back at the dense bushes that hid the clearing from sight. Lisa padded beside her while Saderia and Dash slunk up behind them, staying close together so that their sides were touching for reassurance. It was eerily silent and peaceful in the forest, but instead of the peace seeming serene it felt more like the calm before a storm, a quiet pause for a predator hiding in the shadows waiting to pounce.

The dense bushes and the thick, leafy trees above seemed uncomfortably still. Broken sunlight filtered in between the leafy forest canopy, lighting up patches of woods as if highlighting them with a searchlight. It seemed like whatever was out there was just waiting for one of them to step into the beams of light and become an easier target. A sharp wind rustled lightly, almost mockingly, through the trees, making the oaks

groan as they moved with the breeze. Saderia tensed and Dash jumped when the flutter of a bird's wings broke the silence.

The sound of their paw steps echoed through the woods as they trampled down grass and crushed dead leaves under their paws. The sound seemed louder than normal even though Saderia and her friends were trying to be silent. Saderia found herself stepping as lightly as possible and trying especially hard to avoid dead leaves, fearing the raucous crunching sound they would produce. It was as if they were walking through a dead forest, a woods abandoned and devoid of any life at all. It was as if they were strangers in their own home.

Saderia and Dash turned to each other with the same pale, uneasy expression that reflected what they were both feeling. Saderia was already regretting her decision to come here. Scenes of what Loki had described flashed through her mind: the wailing of the leopard who hadn't come back, immeasurable amounts of blood spilled onto the forest floor, the shriek of one of the woods animals...

Wincing, Saderia violently shook the horrid visions from her mind and forced herself to focus on the path in front of them. Loki led them as quickly and quietly as possible through the forest, glancing nervously back from time to time. The four of them kept their gazes trained in four different directions, jumping every time a sound interrupted their concentration. So far they hadn't seen anything to alarm them and Saderia tried to make herself relax, reminding herself that this had been her idea and that even if she was scared she had to be brave.

"We're almost to Hillcrest Rock," Loki murmured almost too quietly for any of them to hear.

Saderia looked ahead and could just barely make out the edge of a large, brown rock in the distance, covered in shrubs and shrouded by trees. "Good," she whispered. "Let's hurry then."

Dash and Lisa nodded as they darted closer to the rock, creeping carefully through the dense undergrowth and struggling to stay silent. Their paw steps still sounded harsh and noisy in the still woods, but Saderia was suddenly aware of the fact that they had gotten louder. Frowning, she carefully put a paw to her lips to signal for the others to be quiet. The three of them frowned back at her, but placed their paws more carefully; the racket didn't go down. Saderia suddenly felt a flash of fear and anxiety

creep down her spine when she realized that she and her friends weren't the ones making the loud crunching noises. And they weren't alone. Swallowing hard, she signaled for her friends to stop moving, feeling as if her lungs had stopped working.

The others frowned at her again but stopped in their tracks, their paws still and silent against the ground. The moment they stopped, they all grew pale as they realized that the crunching sounds of footsteps hadn't ceased. Something was still out there, stalking and searching.

Lisa looked about to faint from fear while Loki unsheathed her claws and began looking around wildly, trying to spot the enemy and figure out the best way to attack. Dash dug his claws into the ground and looked around frantically, silently stepping closer to Saderia for reassurance and to protect her. He turned to look at her, his amber eyes brimming with fear.

With a determined glare, she quickly positioned herself to look around and prepare for an attack. She let out a growl, but before she could try to spot the enemy, the woods seems to erupt with the most jarring sound she had ever heard. Saderia let out a gasp of horror as a hideous, deadly *Crack!* split the air and every tree, shrub, and leaf seemed to shudder and cower at the sound of it. Saderia, Dash, Loki, and Lisa stood frozen to the spot in sheer terror. The horrible sound reverberated through the forest as if to prevent it from recovering and soon it was followed by the sickening shriek of an animal in pain. Terror filled Saderia's heart as the scream echoed through the thick air of the woods.

"Run!" she shrieked. Her mind whirled with fear as her paws slammed against the shuddering earth, launching her in the closest direction to take her away from the awful sound. Something moved in the distance and Saderia thought she caught a flash of something black, but she couldn't be sure. The forest around her blurred into an unnatural mixture of brown and green as she darted away with her friends close beside her.

Loki and Lisa raced ahead of her to lead them back to the clearing, but Dash stuck close to Saderia as the two of them bolted through the woods as fast as they could. Saderia was barely aware of anything around them except the blur of Loki's retreating tail and the thundering of footsteps far behind them. Fear clouded her mind and all she could do was hope that she and her friends would live to see another day. Her paws practically

soared across the ground as she bolted through the forest, ignoring the tugging and pricking of bushes and brambles.

Running at top speed, the four of them burst out of the forest. Practically leaping into the clearing, Saderia didn't stop running until she and Dash, along with Loki and Lisa, were sure they had put the sound and the enemy far behind them.

"Loki!" All four of them looked up in alarm as two identical, powerful-looking leopards charged toward them at an incredibly high speed. Saderia could sense relief wash over her cheetah friend.

"Maka! Machra!" Loki exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with hope. "Where's Mom and Dad?"

"In the house," one of the leopards told her. As Saderia realized that the two leopards must be Loki's older brothers, one of her twin brothers demanded, "Where were you?"

"It's a long story; let's just go," Loki replied, racing toward her house at top speed.

"Where are my parents?" Lisa shouted. "They're safe, right?"

"They're fine; get to your home," one of the leopards shouted back at her as they followed Loki into one of the small houses. Lisa scrambled to her paws, giving Saderia and Dash a terrified but concerned look. "You should get home now," she told them quickly before bounding off toward her home where two worried leopards immediately pulled their daughter inside.

"Let's get out of here," Saderia agreed numbly. She winced as the horrible sound replayed in her mind over and over again. When Dash nodded, she immediately jumped to her paws and bolted toward the entrance to the Home of the Leopards' clearing. As the two took off down the dirt path, neither one of them once stopped running until they were sure they had left the mysterious enemy behind.

Karenisha and Makero looked up in alarm when the door slammed shut, their amber and green eyes grew wide with surprise and concern when they saw Saderia and Dash slump to the ground just in front of the door. Saderia and Dash put their heads between their paws. Their sides heaved with pants and their paws were covered with vines they hadn't bothered to avoid or shake off. "Saderia? Dash? What's wrong?" Karenisha exclaimed,

seeing their fearful expressions. “You didn’t see anything out in the woods, did you?”

“Are you okay?” Makero added as he leapt hastily to his paws and raced over to help them up.

“We’re fine. We’re...we’re okay,” Saderia stammered. She struggled to catch her breath and let her father help her to her paws. She and Dash exchanged a terrified glance as they remembered the hideous *crack!* they had heard out in the woods, but neither of them dared to say a word about it yet; they would stay silent until they got themselves together.

“We’re just going to go to our room,” Saderia said nervously, leading Dash away with her tail and trying to ignore the puzzlement on her parents’ faces.

Once they shut the door to Saderia’s room, Dash rapidly turned to face her with scared amber eyes. “We’re going to tell them what happened, right?”

Saderia was silent as she climbed onto her blue bed. “I don’t know yet. I...I think we should go back tomorrow,” she murmured, studying her paws.

Dash’s amber eyes widened. “Go *back*? Are you out of your mind? Why would you ever want to go back?”

Saderia sighed and stared at a wall without really seeing it, as if she was staring through it to something different, to a bleak, painful future.

“When I heard that sound, I thought I saw something. We still don’t know what’s out there, Dash. This thing could destroy the whole forest. No one else will go there to investigate, so I have to do it for the forest.”

Dash sat uneasily beside her. “You don’t *have* to,” he murmured. “You’ve already done enough; you don’t have to help everyone and everything. You can’t just sacrifice yourself for the forest.”

Saderia’s eyes flashed. “But this forest is my home. It’s my kingdom. My family and I are supposed to protect it with our lives, if necessary. Besides, I know there’s something really bad going on and if no one finds out about it in time to stop it...” She trailed off. “The whole forest might be in danger.”

“But what if that *thing* out there hurts you?” Dash retorted. His eyes narrowed with pain. “What if it...*kills* you? What am I supposed to do then?”

“What if it kills the whole forest?” Saderia countered.

“Then what good will it do to sacrifice yourself now if there’s nothing we can do and it’s just going to kill us anyway?” He let out a long sigh and lowered his voice, resting his dark brown tail across her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Saderia, but what can we do? If you really think this thing is so dangerous then what can any of us do about it?”

“I don’t know,” Saderia sighed, hating the look of helplessness on his face. “But maybe if we know more about the enemy, we’ll be able to figure out how to stop it. Look, I’ll be careful in Twisted Creek Woods, I promise, but if I do get hurt, then *you* have to help the forest.”

“And if you get killed? Am I supposed to just get over it in a second and go tell Karenisha and Makero their daughter’s dead?” He looked away. “If something happened to you, I’d never be able to go on. I’d never forgive myself. You’re my best friend and I can’t even imagine life without you. You’re the one who always helps me when I’m upset or scared and without you, I just don’t know what I’d do.”

She sighed and looked down. “I have a really bad feeling about this, but I think my instincts only let me know that something bad is going on so that I can do something about it. Mom and Dad aren’t getting anywhere and neither is anybody else and the forest animals have stopped volunteering to go into those woods.”

“For good reason,” Dash retorted.

“I suppose that’s true, but I have to try this one more time. Don’t you want to help our forest, Dash?”

“Of course,” he replied. “And I’d go if it was just me that was at stake, but I can’t put you in danger.”

Saderia blinked and suddenly realized that if she did go, she would be putting Dash in danger, too. Her eyes widened in horror at the terrifying revelation. She hadn’t thought about it, but now she felt a rush of fear and dread as she thought about what might happen if she brought Dash. Flinching, she immediately looked away, her expression conflicted; she still wanted to discover what was hiding in the woods, but she couldn’t bear to risk Dash’s life. For a long moment, she was silent until she finally murmured, “You’re right. I’m sorry. We won’t go.”

Dash was silent, too, until he finally muttered, “What’s your intuition telling you?”

Saderia kept her gaze trained on her paws. "It's telling me that something dangerous is terrorizing the forest and that I should check it out so that I might be able to do something. It seems like it's saying that nobody else will do it because of fear or apathy and I can sense the forest animals' fear, too. I want to help them, but it's not worth it. We can't go."

Dash sighed. "You're just saying that now because you're scared for me."

"So we've switched places, then?" Saderia retorted. "We're not going and that's final."

Dash sighed. "Well, you know what's best. I'm worried about you, but maybe I'm just worrying over nothing. Don't try to protect me, Saderia. Just do what you think is best. I'll stay with you no matter what you decide to do."

Saderia didn't like him putting so much faith in her since she wasn't sure what was best. She let out a sigh as she struggled to understand what she should do. For a moment, all she could think about was the *Crack!* sounding through the forest, and the cry of an animal in pain. She winced when a sharp sense of fear and loss sliced through her heart. She couldn't let the forest get hurt just because she was afraid of putting Dash in danger. She knew he would be as careful as she would and he was able to fight for himself. They would look after each other.

With a heavy heart, she finally gave voice to what she thought was best. "It will be dangerous, but I think we should go back and check it out," she muttered. "But we have to be extremely careful and we should look out for each other."

"Of course," Dash agreed. "If you really think it's best, then I'll go with you." He paused. "Just be careful."

"I will. And you too."

He smiled weakly. "Don't worry about me."

Saderia sighed and took a deep breath. "No matter what's terrorizing our forest, we need to find out about it so we can fix this problem before it gets worse." A feeling of determination tickled her paws even as a shadow of despair lingered. Somehow, she didn't think she would like the outcome of this even if she and her best friend made it out okay. Remembering Loki's words, she hoped with a shudder that she could do something to protect her forest before it was destroyed, but still the words lingered. *This*

*thing won't just stay in Twisted Creek Woods. The danger is going to spread to the rest of the forest and then none of us will be safe. The whole forest is in serious danger.*



# Chapter Five

## A Dangerous Enemy

The frantic flutter of a bird's wings was the only sound to break the silence as the bird's warning call echoed through the still, silent woods. Eerie, incandescent light filtered down through the thick, impenetrable green canopy of trees above, casting odd shadows across their solid trunks. A light breeze fluttered through the silent air, but not a single leaf rustled in the nervous wind. It was as if the entire forest stood silent, waiting, holding its breath, until slowly the leaves began to tremble when a dark shadow fell across the frail sprigs of grass.

Saderia looked up and let out a gasp when a shadow ghosted behind the trees, disappearing before she could even wonder if it was real. Her eyes narrowed as she studied the trees around her. She whirled around when another sound jolted her from behind then turned when another sound rang out from the patch of woods behind her. Her heart beat frantically as she backed in a circle, searching the woods desperately for the attacker. Her fur began to bristle with the intuitive knowledge that she was being watched. She glanced around desperately, her eyes seeking out the familiar fur of her best friend. Her amber irises widened with fear when she realized he wasn't around.

A harsh sound erupted from behind her, sending her racing away in the opposite direction as fast as she could. Her paws pounded against the rough, blood-scented ground and her tail streamed wildly out behind her as she struggled to get away. Her head whipped around to stare in front of her as she ran faster. She let out a gasp of hope when she saw a sort of light through the dense forest ahead, shining as if showing her the way out. Running faster, she dove forward, only to let out a scream of horror when she found herself in a clearing covered in blood.

Her eyes darted wildly back and forth and she felt horror rise in her throat as she stared out at the clearing. Her terrified amber gaze lingered on the bloodied bodies of the woods animals that lay strewn across the

crimson-tinged grass. She let out a cry of dismay as her gaze scanned the clearing and she felt a tinge of confusion when she saw a sort of dark green, triangular den propped up at the very edge of the clearing. She gaped in horror when her eyes flicked toward the opposite edge of the clearing. Stumbling backward, she tried to let out a gasp, but no sound came out. She could only stare in shock at the dull, lifeless body of a leopard lying just a few paces away from her. Her eyes widened in disbelief as Loki's words ran through her mind: *Out of the four leopards...only three came back...*

A sharp noise sounded from behind her. She whirled around and let out a gasp of alarm when she saw something black poking out from the trees. Her heart stopped as she stared back at it, her eyes wide with terror and her mind blank with fear. She stood frozen to the spot, barely noticing when a shout erupted from the patch of woods beside her. A dark brown figure leapt in front of her just as a sharp *Crack!* echoed through the woods. She let out a shriek of horror when she saw the fear in Dash's amber eyes fade to nothingness and watched him slump to the ground, staining the grass dark red with blood.

She looked up and found herself staring back at the killer, her eyes wide with horror. The world around her seemed to disappear and a sudden terrible scene drifted into her mind. A sharp *Crack!* rang out through the woods and blood spattered her amber gaze as she found herself suddenly staring at her home, gaping in horror at the dirt and debris lining the cracked floor of the abandoned house. She looked up to see the windows shattered, the door flung carelessly open, the familiar tables crumbled and destroyed, her family nowhere to be found. She whirled around and let her gaze fall on the world behind her then let out a silent wail of horror when she found herself staring out at the broken forest, her eyes trailing over fallen trees, blood-spattered paths, and red-tinged rivers.

Looking out at her destroyed home, she realized as her vision turned hazy and she slumped to the ground that the destruction of the forest had begun...

“Saderia! Saderia! Wake up!”

“Huh?” Saderia sat up with a sharp gasp as her eyes darted wildly around her surroundings, their amber depths terrified and confused. Slowly the room began to come into focus. She swung her disoriented gaze around

and froze when she found herself staring into the dark, surprised face of a lion. Her heart stopped and she jumped in alarm then let out a sigh of relief when she recognized the face. “Dash!” she exclaimed. Her eyes widened and as her trembling body went numb with shock and relief. “I...I thought you were dead!”

The dark brown lion frowned. “Dead? Why would you think I was dead?” He paused then rested his tail on her shoulder, brushing it as soothingly as possible even though his amber eyes were wide with confusion and fear. Ignoring his gaze, Saderia looked at him closely, noticing with a weak sigh that blood was no longer pouring out of his chest. There wasn’t even a mark to show it had ever happened. Blinking rapidly, she slowly looked up at his face and saw that Dash’s amber eyes were troubled. “Did you have a dream?” he whispered. “...or a Dream?”

Saderia blinked again, as if unable to comprehend anything he was saying. She paused then nervously looked behind him at the peaceful blue room around her. Her eyes widened as she took in her familiar surroundings and realized that the soft carpet was free of debris, the windows were clean and intact, and the bed beneath her was all in one piece. Her gaze turned swiftly to the window and she felt a tingle of relief as she stared at the unchanged forest outside. Every tree stood sturdy and proud in the woods around her home, their trunks firm and unscarred. The grass covering the ground was lush and untainted, its glistening green stalks glinting in the yellow light of the sun.

Letting out a long sigh, she fell back against the bed, closing her eyes as relief washed over her and her tense limbs began to relax. She opened her eyes and looked up only when Dash’s voice broke through the quiet air.

“Are you all right?” he demanded. “You were screaming in your sleep!” He paused. “Did...did you have a Dream?”

Saderia stared silently up at him as his words sunk in and a terrible fear raced through her veins. She winced as the awful Dream flickered through her mind and felt her entire body freeze in terror. Every detail from her horrifying Dream raced through her mind. Her head whipped around to stare out at the peaceful forest outside and she shuddered with dread, realizing that if she had really seen the future, the calm forest outside would soon be nothing but bloody wasteland. A violent shiver swept over her body

as she stared fearfully up at Dash, her terrified amber eyes giving life to all the thoughts she was too afraid to speak out loud.

Dash's gaze darkened with understanding as he leaned forward and pressed closer to her for comfort. "What did you see?" he whispered.

Saderia's eyes clouded as she stared lifelessly out across the room. She shivered when the awful images of the dead forest animals and blood-covered woods flitted before her dull gaze. "I saw the destruction of the whole forest..." she murmured.

Dash's dark brown tail flicked nervously back and forth. "What do you mean?"

With a deep, shuddering breath, Saderia slowly sat up and quietly began telling him about the Dream. When she finished, Dash was horribly quiet. After what seemed like lifetimes, he finally whispered, "I *died*?"

A violent shudder racked Saderia's body as she thought about the awful scene and remembered seeing the light leave Dash's eyes. Struggling to hide a flash of fear and doubt, Saderia tried to tell herself that the images her Dreams showed her weren't set in stone. That the only reason her Dreams showed her such horrifying scenes was so that she could be wary of them and attempt to change them. She tried to tell herself her Dream was merely a dark warning, but when she looked into Dash's wide, fearful eyes, the only thing she could say was, "The whole forest died."

"So we're all doomed?" Dash exclaimed.

"No!" Saderia exclaimed, shaking her head to try to clear it. "At least, I don't think so." As she slowly pushed her awful Dream out of her mind and struggled to find a way to fight it, to make sure it never came true, she found she was able to think more clearly. "My Dreams *warn* me, Dash. They don't just predict the future and say there's no way to change it. My Dream was probably telling me what *could* happen to urge me to do something to stop it. My Dreams are meant to give us clues to figure out how to change the future—albeit cryptic ones. We have to look at all the details to try to figure this out."

Dash's amber eyes narrowed in disbelief. Saderia met his wary, uncertain glance as calmly as she could, knowing that what she said had to be true.

At last, Dash let out a long sigh and looked away. "Okay, but how exactly can we figure it out? What details matter?"

“They all must matter somehow. That’s how my Dreams work.” She paused then added, “I think we should focus on where I was in the Dream and what led to the things that happened rather than the actual happenings.”

“Well, I think you were obviously in Twisted Creek Woods,” Dash guessed.

“I think so, too.” She paused, trying to ignore her fear of the awful Dream as she struggled to understand it and figure out *why* her Dream had played out the way it did. “I think we split up in the Dream,” she said suddenly, remembering how she had looked for Dash and felt alarmed when she realized he wasn’t there. “We shouldn’t have done that, so we shouldn’t do it in the future. We have to stick together.”

“And what about the part where I died?” Dash demanded. “How do we make sure *that* doesn’t happen?”

Saderia sighed, suppressing a shiver of fear. “When you...died, I think the Dream was just showing me how dangerous this thing is and telling us that we would have to be careful not to let it know we’re trying to find it. I think it was warning us not to split up because if we did, one or both of us would end up...dead. I remember looking for you in the first part of the Dream and panicking when I couldn’t find you. Because I was so alarmed, I ended up running into that horrible clearing without thinking. Maybe if you had been there, we could have stayed calm and found a way to escape safely.” She paused. “I think that as long as we keep our eyes open, be on the alert, and stick together, we’ll be able to save ourselves.”

Dash swallowed hard. “I hope you’re right about that. But what about the last part where the whole forest was destroyed? Is that really going to happen?”

“I don’t know. I think that was in the very, *very* distant future. I think it was showing me what would happen if we didn’t do something.” She sighed. “But we’re not going back to Twisted Creek Woods.”

Dash blinked. “We’re not? I thought we decided yesterday that we *would* go.”

Saderia stared at him in disbelief. “Dash, you *died*,” she exclaimed. “I can’t risk losing you just to find out what’s going on.”

“Even for the forest?”

“Someone else will probably figure out what’s happening and stop it,” she snapped defensively, looking away. “...Eventually.”

His eyes narrowed with disbelief. “What’s your instinct saying?” he prompted.

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “No matter what it’s saying, I’m not listening this time. I’m not going to lead you to your death.”

“It’s *my* death, so let me worry about it,” Dash replied. “If things are really going to get that bad in the future then someone has to do something. No one else is getting anywhere, so why shouldn’t we try?”

“So you want to go?” She narrowed her eyes disbelievingly.

“I didn’t exactly say I *wanted* to go. Just that you should think about it more. I’ll still go with your decision.” He gave her a slight encouraging smile, although he still looked nervous.

Saderia sighed and fell silent, forcing herself to try to understand what she should do and feeling painfully aware of the fact that her instinct was urging her to go back to the woods. No matter what her instinct told her to do, she couldn’t stand the thought of losing Dash. She had grown so close to him and the thought of him getting hurt was unbearable. She couldn’t risk losing her best friend. “No,” she said firmly. “We’re not going. It’s too big of a risk.”

Dash just shrugged. “If that’s what you think is best. Come on then, let’s go see if Karenisha and Makero have gotten any leads.”

Saderia smiled weakly, grateful that he wasn’t going to argue with her. When he jumped down from the bed, she carefully followed. She glanced back at the window before following him out of her room and down the hall.

“Mom!” she called as she and Dash padded toward the dining room table where the two royal tigers were sitting. When her parents looked up at them with sad, questioning looks, Saderia paused in the archway, about to ask if they had gotten any closer to figuring out the problem. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could utter a word, she was interrupted by a loud banging sound from behind them. Whirling around in alarm, Saderia felt her eyes widen in surprise when a spotted, yellow brown streak burst through the door and darted into the house so fast the only thing Saderia could see was a spotted blur. She gasped as the figure skidded to a halt in front of her and looked up at the cheetah in shock.

Loki faced Karenisha and Makero with green eyes full of terror and alarm. “You have to get someone to help,” she choked out. Her sides

heaved with pants as she stumbled desperately toward the King and Queen. "One of the leopards has gone missing again. Hateko was so desperate to find out what's going on that he must have gone into Twisted Creek Woods last night and he hasn't come back. Please, we're afraid something horrible has happened to him! Only a few leopards have offered to look for him; the others are too scared! Please send someone to help!"

The King and Queen exchanged an alarmed glance. After a brief hesitation, Karenisha turned to Loki and told her as calmly as possible, "We'll see if we can gather a search party. If we can't, we'll help you search ourselves. Run back and tell Maeta we're doing all we can to find some animals to search for your missing leopard."

"Thank you," Loki panted before whirling around and bolting out of the house.

As the door slammed shut behind her and Karenisha darted toward it, Makero turned briskly to Saderia and Dash with troubled green eyes. "Stay here," he ordered. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

The King gave Saderia and Dash a stern, lingering glare before darting past them and throwing open the door to race after Karenisha. He disappeared behind a thick clump of trees, leaving the door hanging wide open. Cia and Uncle Jash bolted after them with blue eyes wide with alarm, having heard the whole exchange from the hallway.

As the four tigers charged out into the woods, letting the empty house fall silent behind them, Saderia and Dash shared a long, anxious glance. Feeling her fur prickle with the desperation, terror, and loss that Loki and the other leopards must be feeling, Saderia let out a long sigh.

Dash glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes. When she turned to look at him again, all he said was, "We're going back, aren't we?"

Saderia drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, her eyes never blinking as they focused in the direction her parents had gone. "Yep," she replied before racing out of the house and letting the door swing shut behind her.

Loud, terrified murmuring reached Saderia's ears seconds before she and Dash loped to an unsteady halt in the entrance to the large Home of the Leopard's clearing. Her eyes scanned the crowd of frightened leopards as they moved restlessly back and forth, their tails swishing nervously through

the air and their eyes clouded with unease. Panic and despair spread through the wide clearing like wildfire. All the leopards cast scared, anxious glances in the direction of the woods, their expressions masks of dread and sheer terror. It seemed as if every leopard faced the woods, watching and waiting for something awful to happen. Their ears strained as they listened for the awful sound they knew would come.

Saderia swallowed hard as she swung her gaze around the clearing and spotted Maeta sitting next to one of the houses, her brown eyes dark as she stared out at the woods. Saderia's tail flicked uneasily when she glanced at the frail leopard sitting beside her. She winced with pain when she saw the tears streaming down the fragile leopard's face.

"He...he th-thought he should d-do something!" the small leopard wailed as she falteringly stroked her large, swollen belly. "He was afraid f-for me and...and our b-baby and for all of us! What if he's dead?"

Maeta's spotted tail gently stroked the leopard's shoulder. "There, there, Marlina," she heard the leopard leader whisper. "Hateko knew what he was getting into and we've already sent out a lot of leopards to search for him. They'll find him."

"What if they don't? It's not enough!" Maeta's pregnant sister wailed.

Saderia flinched at the pain in Marlina's hoarse, desperate voice and forced herself to look away as grief and sympathy stabbed at her heart. Her gaze nervously scanned the clearing and she froze when she saw Loki standing by her den next to her parents and her two brothers, a dark shadow on her face. The cheetah-leopard's gaze was trained in the direction of the woods. When Saderia gazed at the house a few feet away, she recognized the face of Lisa peering out at the clearing through a partially boarded-up window, her eyes hollow and grave. A shiver of dread trailed up Saderia's spine as she looked around at the other leopards. Whoever wasn't pacing around or murmuring anxiously to their neighbor was staring at the woods with that same ominous expression, watching and waiting for the sound they knew was inevitable.

"Come on," she hissed to Dash as she began to creep around the edge of the clearing. She ignored a tingle of fear and unease when she slunk behind houses and headed toward the edge of Twisted Creek Woods. Dash crept soundlessly behind her as they slipped toward the bushes on the edge



of the clearing. When Saderia reached the thick undergrowth on the edge of the clearing, she glanced back one last time before diving into the dense bushes, determined to find Hateko before it was too late.

Together, the two shuffled through the large bushes, keeping their heads and tails down and being careful to avoid snapping any leaves or rustling the undergrowth. As soon as they were far enough away from the clearing not to be seen, Saderia and Dash slowly picked themselves up off the ground, dusted the leaves out of their fur, and turned to face the silent woods around them.

Ignoring a flash of fear, Saderia slowly began creeping forward, her tail trailing just an inch above the ground. Her gaze locked on one of the nearby trees and her tail flicked nervously when she saw the rough, scarred bark. Turning her gaze away, she found her eyes scanning the grass in front of her, studying the light green sprigs intently for any signs of blood. She almost never blinked as she looked up and studied the forest floor ahead of her, searching for any sign of a dark, unnatural shadow.

Her heart skipped and she whirled around in alarm when she heard a loud snap behind her. She narrowed her eyes when she saw Dash standing nervously behind her, his messy mane falling over his face as he looked down to examine the leaf he had smashed. He shrugged sheepishly when he caught her looking at him. "Sorry," he whispered.

"Keep quiet from now on," Saderia hissed with a sigh and an annoyed flick of her tail.

"Sorry," Dash muttered again as he carefully picked his way forward to walk beside her.

Saderia ignored him and let her gaze flick to the dark trees on her right to scan the dark, ominous depths of the woods. She shivered as a soft wind breezed past them, ruffling their fur and rustling the leaves on the trees around them. Hard as she tried, she could not assuage the feeling that there was something out there, watching her, waiting for her to fall into its trap just like she had in the Dream. Shaking her head, she forced herself to focus on the path ahead, picking her way carefully around leaves and twigs so as not to make a sound.

Speckled patches of strange green light filtered down through the holes in the leafy canopy above, highlighting Saderia's yellow orange fur when she passed under them. As she walked, she strained her ears to listen

not just for the sounds of an attacker, but for the familiar sounds of birdsong or chattering squirrels. A tingle of unease shivered down her spine when she realized the woods was completely silent, as if even the smaller woods animals were waiting for something awful to happen. She looked down as her paws brushed against a rough patch of dirt and her eyes narrowed when she saw her own large paw print pressed into the earth next to the small print of a tiny squirrel.

“Saderia, where are we going?” Dash whispered from behind her, his soft words unnaturally loud in the silence of the forest.

Saderia glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. “To Hillcrest Rock,” she replied.

“Again?”

“Yes. I remember the way Loki went before and if we stand any chance of finding Hateko, our best bet would be to get somewhere high to try to see him from above.”

Dash nodded slowly. “All right,” he murmured.

He fell silent as they walked onward, avoiding leaves and casting nervous glances into the woods on either side of them as they searched the landscape for any sign of spotted fur. After several moments, Dash finally glanced over at her and broke the silence.

“Saderia?” he whispered.

“Yes?” she replied.

“If we find that thing terrorizing the forest before we find Hateko and it sees us...what do we do?”

Saderia froze and stared back at him, her eyes narrowed with fear. She carefully blinked her eyes and continued walking, trying to ignore the fearful prickling of her fur. Her eyes darkened as her Dream flickered through her mind and she realized with a surge of fear and horror that when Dash had been killed, there hadn't been anything near him. No one had clawed him or bit him. The only indication of a threat had been that black thing poking out of the bushes and the strange sound. After that, Dash had fallen without any warning at all, bleeding as if something had stabbed him even though nothing was even close to him. Her heart beat faster and her eyes widened with fear. What kind of creature could kill an animal without even getting near it?

“Saderia?” Dash whispered.

“We just have to make sure it *doesn't* see us,” Saderia replied darkly, trying desperately to hide the fear in her gaze.

Dash gulped and fell silent before nodding and staring nervously at the ground, reading the meaning in her grave words.

Ignoring Dash's fearful gaze, Saderia turned her gaze to scan the trees once more, feeling her heart stop when her eyes fell on the destroyed bark of one of the trees. She swallowed nervously as she studied the scarred bark. If the enemy could do that to the trees, she could only imagine what it could do to her. Would she even have a chance to hide before it spotted her?

Shaking the fearful thoughts away, Saderia forced her paws to keep moving across the overgrown, grassy ground. Her eyes locked on the sprigs of grass below her and she felt her heart speed up every time her shadow fell across the delicate sprigs, remembering the awful shadow from her Dream. Without thinking, she found herself turning to look back, her fur bristling as if sensing something in the shadows of the woods behind her. Feeling Dash's fur bristle fearfully beside her, she let her eyes scan the woods behind her.

“Saderia?” Dash whispered. “Did you see...?”

“It's nothing,” she muttered as she continued walking, keeping her eyes locked on the forest behind her. Her fur bristled when she imagined the enemy jumping out from behind her at any second.

Dash watched her nervously as he fell into step beside her, following her gaze with his eyes as he searched for the unseen enemy, as well.

As they moved deeper into the still forest, Saderia's fiery amber gaze remained trained on the woods behind her. She continued moving, watching, waiting, and silently telling herself when she saw nothing hiding in the shadows that the only thing she sensed was paranoia. Nonetheless, she continued to look back. Her eyes narrowed, but suddenly she froze when her paw met something wet and sticky and a tiny splashing noise interrupted the silence of the woods.

Whirling around, Saderia let out a gasp of shock and jumped back, her eyes widening in horror. Her mouth gaped open in shock when she glanced down at her paw. A feeling of sickness and dismay flashed through her as she watched dirty red blood drip from her soaked paw and seep into her yellow orange fur.

“Saderia!”

She whirled around at the sound of Dash’s terrified shout and let out a muted scream when she found herself staring at a dark red splotch of blood. A soft, strangled gasp of disgust tore out of her throat as she watched her paw print dry in the huge red stain, speckled with smeared bits of blood and dirt. Her gaze jerked upward and she watched in disgust as a single leaf floated downward, its bright green surface quickly swallowed up by a tide of crimson.

Sickness rose in her throat as she backed away from it, smearing blood across the light green grass when her paw brushed the earth. She whirled around to stare at Dash when he spoke, his eyes wide and his expression sickened as he stared at the red stain.

“S-Saderia?” he stammered. “What is this? What did this?”

Saderia’s gaze turned to focus on the huge bloodstain and she didn’t reply. Her whole body shuddered as she turned forcefully away from the stain, swallowing a rush of sickness and despair. A flash of dismay darkened her gaze when she thought back to the nonchalant group of animals her parents had sent out to investigate before. If this was the kind of clue they had found, how could anyone think this wasn’t a big deal?

Blinking rapidly as frightened tears swam before her eyes, Saderia looked up and gasped. Her heart skipped a beat when she spotted strange prints in the dirt-covered ground beyond the sickening bloodstain. After a quick hesitation, she closed her eyes and leapt over the blood, trying not to look at it as her paws slammed heavily against the dirt. Leaning downward, she studied the odd tracks indented in the gritty ground and frowned when she made out a strange print she had never seen before in addition to the familiar hoof prints of a deer.

Dash followed her gaze and frowned as he skirted around the blood and crept closer to the prints. “What...what are those?” he whispered, wrinkling his nose in confusion.

Saderia narrowed her eyes and slipped closer, placing her own bloodstained paw into the foreign print. Her frown deepened when she pulled it back and realized the strange paw print was longer than hers, although not quite as deep. She wondered uneasily what kind of creature could make such a strange print. “I don’t know,” she finally murmured. “Do...do you think we should follow them?”

Dash looked up at her in alarm. "They might lead us to the enemy, but do we really want to find him?"

Saderia took a deep breath and looked up. "Yes, because we might find Hateko, too. Let's go." With a sharp flick of her tail, she slowly stepped forward, placing her paws delicately into the prints of the strange creature and trying to ignore the blood sticking to her paw. After several moments of hesitation, Dash carefully began to follow her.

Trying to ignore the sudden fast beating of her heart, Saderia kept walking, her ears pricked for any sound. Being careful to avoid crunching any leaves or twigs, the two continued onward, the only noise the sound of their paws thudding lightly against the ground. After several moments, the ghastly splotch of blood disappeared behind a mess of thick bushes and heavy brambles. Soon the strange prints they followed stopped when their paws once again met cool, soft grass rather than the dirt where the prints had been engraved.

Saderia pricked her ears when a sudden loud snap echoed through the forest, sending tiny jolts of fear through her body. Lashing her tail, she turned around to glare at Dash. "Keep it down," she hissed.

Dash's wide amber eyes stared fearfully back into hers. "It wasn't me," he whispered.

Saderia blinked and stared back at him. She opened her mouth to reply, but froze when another sharp snap broke the silence of the thick air around them. Her heart skipped a beat as she whirled around, her gaze wildly scanning the forest around her. Her claws unsheathed and her body went numb when she heard another sharp crackle from deep within the woods. Backing away with trembling paws, she nearly jumped when she felt Dash's fur brush hers. Their terrified gazes swung around to meet each other as they pressed closer together, desperately trying to locate the sound.

Another low crunch filled the air and Saderia whirled around frantically, straining her ears to locate the sound. She froze when another crunch drifted over to them from deep inside the woods, quickly followed by another. Shaking fearfully, Saderia began turning in circles in a desperate attempt to find the sound. She felt her heart stop with horror when she realized the noise seemed to echo from every inch of the forest. A soft rustle whispered against her ears and she whirled around to try to find the

enemy, only to jump and turn in the opposite direction when another crunch sounded from the forest.

“Saderia,” Dash whispered.

Saderia swung her gaze rapidly back and forth, turning the dense trees around her into nothing but a green and brown blur as the low crunching sounds slowly became louder and louder. The two whirled around at the sound of a rustle in the bushes, their eyes widening in terror as they tried to see through the woods. The horrible Dream she had experienced flashed through her mind as Saderia stood frozen to the spot. She let out a soft cry when she felt Dash’s bristling fur leave hers and whirled around just as he shouted, “Saderia, over here!”

She looked up as he pointed to a huge tree standing just a few feet away, beckoning her desperately with his tail. As another sharp snap echoed through the woods behind her, Saderia dove toward the large tree, feeling her heart pound rapidly in her chest. She crouched down behind the thick trunk by Dash and peered out over the root of the tree to watch in horror as the snapping sounds grew louder. Shivering, she pressed closer to Dash, feeling his quivering fur brush against hers and his paw clamp tightly over her own. They waited in silence, listening as the crunching noises echoed wildly through the forest.

Saderia pricked her ears as the sound suddenly became louder and faster until the entire forest was filled with the rapid, nonstop sound of leaves crunching beneath the feet of the enemy. The leaves above her seemed to shiver as a stiff, frigid wind slithered through the woods. Her heart beating so fast it burned in her chest, her eyes desperately searched the murky depths. Her whole body felt numb as the sounds grew so loud it seemed as if the enemy was right on top of them. She gritted her teeth and her body tensed as she stared at the thick clump of woods around her. She dug her claws deep into the grassy earth below her and prepared herself to see the enemy.

A loud snap echoed around the forest, but even as Saderia braced herself to face the enemy, she was unprepared for the wave of horror that froze her in place when an orange, spotted leopard burst out of the bushes in front of her, his sides heaving with pants and his eyes wide with sheer terror. Hateko.

Her eyes widened and a sharp gasp tore out of her throat as she jumped to her paws. The leopard whipped around as Dash desperately pulled her back down, trapping her against the ground and wrapping his tail tightly around her mouth to keep her silent. Her body shuddering violently with fear, she looked back up at Hateko, freezing and letting out a stifled gasp of horror when their eyes met. In the single instant their eyes locked on each other, it was as if the entire forest froze and disappeared around them. Every inch of Saderia's body screamed as she struggled to break free of Dash's rough grasp. Her chest burned with fear and pain as she stared out at the leopard and she wanted to cry out when all the terror in his eyes coursed through her body. His green eyes never left hers as if they were a lifeline, as if they were the only things that could save him. Saderia stared back into his eyes, feeling a stifled scream tear out of her throat. Violent shudders raced through her body as a loud sickening **Crack!** erupted through the woods, shaking the trees around her and making the grass cower against the ground when another quickly followed.

Hateko's mouth gaped open in a silent scream as blood burst out of his chest. His eyes never left hers as the life slowly drained from his wide green gaze. Their emerald depths rapidly grew dimmer and dimmer as he stumbled forward. Waves of pain rolled off the leopard and Saderia struggled frantically in Dash's grasp, her eyes never leaving his. As the last bit of life drained from Hateko's dull green gaze, his mouth moved lifelessly up and down to form the last silent words he could muster, "Save my child," before he collapsed to the ground. Dead.

Saderia never blinked as she stared at the leopard. She thrashed desperately in Dash's grasp as anguish coursed through her body. She went numb and felt a deep shiver race up her spine. She felt as if her entire world was falling apart as she stared at the crumpled form of Hateko. She blinked rapidly, desperately trying to push the image of his lifeless eyes staring back into hers out of her mind.

Looking up as a sharp crackle sounded from beyond Hateko's body, she felt herself freeze in horror when the most hideous creature she had ever seen stepped out from behind the bushes. Her heart pounded and she stared up at the creature and her eyes widened as they raked over its pale, hairless skin and the dark green and brown layers covering its tall body. Two large, clunky black 'paws' stepped out onto the grass, somehow holding the

creature up on only two feet, while in its pale, upper paws it carried a large black thing...the very thing she had seen in her Dream. The thing that had killed Dash in her Dream...and the thing that had ended Hateko's life. Fear and disgust rose in her throat as she watched the creature step forward. Her eyes widened and her stomach grew queasy when she saw it bend over and pick up Hateko's body. Her heart stopped in horror when she saw it start to drag him away through the bushes, leaving nothing but a bloody trail behind.

As the creature disappeared into the woods, Saderia could only stare at the place where Hateko's body had been, feeling so numb she barely noticed when Dash pulled his rough paws off of her legs and released her from his grip. It was only when she heard him shout, "Saderia, look out!" did she finally look up.

Her eyes widened in horror when she saw the tree she had hidden behind rapidly begin to fall. She whirled around, but in the split second it took for her to jump to her paws, it was already too late. The only thing she saw was Dash racing toward her just a few feet away before something rough slammed against her back.

She let out a gasp of pain and her vision grew hazy as she slammed against the ground. She went numb when something smacked against her, sending harsh jolts of pain up her leg when it trapped her awkwardly twisted leg against the ground. Her head smacked against the earth as rough bark scraped her body and leaves tickled her face. Her eyes squeezed shut and the breath left her throat. Her sight blurred with pain and fear. A weak whimper escaped her throat as her body crumpled underneath the heavy weight of the tree.

"Saderia!" Dash darted forward, his eyes wide with horror as he stared at the fallen tree. He spared a glance at the copse of oaks nearby that had caught the falling tree before leaping forward and peering desperately through the mess of branches and leaves that shielded Saderia from his view.

"Saderia," he called desperately. He raked a mass of branches aside and let out a gasp when he saw her lying limply against the ground, her head down and the lower end of her body trapped by the heavy trunk of the tree. His heart skipped a beat as he crept closer, desperate to know if she



was still alive. “Saderia,” he whispered hoarsely. “Saderia, please answer me! Please tell me you’re alive!”

Through a haze of pain and blood, Saderia dimly heard the sound of her name. Feeling as if she was moving in a dream, she slowly raised her head and winced when the action sent shivers of pain down her spine. Slowly she blinked her eyes and frowned when she heard the now excited voice become clearer. As her head slumped painfully against the ground, she managed to blink the haziness from her gaze and soon found herself staring up at a concerned, dark brown face.

“Dash?” she whispered.

“Saderia,” he gasped. “Is anything broken? Can you wriggle out?”

Wincing, Saderia struggled to pull herself out from underneath the tree with her front paws, but failed when the pain grew too strong and her back legs refused to budge. She looked up at Dash, her amber eyes fearful. “No,” she whispered. “The tree...it’s not crushing me, but I can’t get out! What if it falls?” Her face grew pale. “What if that...that *thing* comes back?”

“I won’t leave you here,” Dash promised firmly. “I’ll...I’ll find a way to get you out. I...I could try pushing on the tree!”

“No, don’t!” she said quickly when she looked up and realized just how precariously the tree was perched on the other oaks. “What if it slips and falls?”

Dash shifted anxiously back and forth. “Then what do we do?” he demanded. His heart pounded with fear as he wondered if the creature really would come back and kill him and Saderia. His heart froze in terror when he heard a crackle from behind. He whirled around and felt his blood run cold when he noticed a rustling in the bushes just a few inches away.

Saderia looked up in horror as Dash dug his claws into the earth and threw himself in front of her to shield her as best as he could. Her eyes widened in terror as she stared past him at the rustling bushes, trying desperately to free herself as the rustling grew louder. Her heart nearly burst out of her chest when suddenly a band of three leopards burst out from behind the undergrowth, skidding to an abrupt halt and gaping at them in surprise.

Saderia went numb with relief, but before either of them could utter a word, both of them froze when another clump of brush began to rustle. An

image of Hateko's lifeless gaze flashed before her eyes as Saderia turned to stare at the bushes, fearing that another creature had been chasing the leopards. She heard herself cry out in equal mixtures of shock and relief when she saw four tigers erupt from behind the bushes instead. Her family.

Dash's eyes widened with hope. "Karenisha! Makero!" he shouted. "Cia! Jash!"

"Saderia? Dash?" Karenisha exclaimed. She turned rapidly around to face them, her own shock mirrored in the stunned expression of Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash. "Wh-what...?" Her eyes trailed over to Saderia and a look of fear and alarm crossed her face.

"Help me get her out!" Dash exclaimed, not wanting to waste another minute in case the tree began to topple. He turned desperately to the confused group of leopards. "You three go and push on the tree while the rest of us get her out!"

The leopards hesitated and exchanged a quick glance before silently darting forward and surrounding all sides of the tree. When all three of them surrounded the tree, they immediately began pushing upward, squeezing their eyes shut as they struggled to hoist the tree off of Saderia's body. The instant the tree jerked upward, Dash, Karenisha, and Makero darted forward and began pulling Saderia out. They quickly helped her to her paws while Cia and Uncle Jash stood back, ready to help the leopards in case any of them lost their grip on the large tree.

Saderia let out a gasp as she stumbled away from the tree and collapsed to the ground, her grazed body aching with pain and her twisted paw stinging with agony. She winced when she heard the tree slam to the ground behind her and looked up as the leopards surrounded her, along with her parents.

"Are you okay?" Makero demanded. He gazed down at her with worried green eyes while Karenisha hovered nearby.

"What are you doing out here?" the Queen demanded.

Saderia looked up when she saw a brown paw press down beside her and found herself looking up into Dash's face. His amber eyes burned with fear and determination. "It doesn't matter. We'll tell you later, but right now we have to get out of here. *Now*," he added in a growl, seeing their confused, hesitant faces.

After one last pause, Karenisha and Makero finally nodded and began helping her to her paws, allowing Dash and one of the leopards to support her as they began trailing through the woods, leading the way back to the Home of the Leopards. Relief coursed through every inch of Saderia's body as she stumbled along even when her paw burned with pain and her heart thumped with fear.

She looked up when one of the other leopards drew closer to her, his eyes narrowed with fear and desperation. He carefully studied her bloodied form with his stunned, frightened gaze. "You...you haven't seen Hateko, have you?" he whispered.

Karenisha and Makero looked back as a shadow fell across Saderia's face and her eyes grew wide and distant with fear. A shiver raced along her spine as Hateko's wild, sightless eyes flashed through her mind, their lifeless green depths seeming to stare into her soul, begging her for help.

Another leopard noticed her look and immediately grew pale. "No..." he whispered.

Saderia looked down as Dash turned to face him, his eyes dull and dark. "We'll tell everyone what happened later. Right now, let's get out of here. It's too dangerous to be here any longer."

After what seemed like ages, Saderia finally found herself stumbling into the Home of the Leopards, supported by Dash and a leopard, led by her parents, and flanked by Cia, Uncle Jash, and the other two leopards. When at last the ominous, enclosing trees gave way to the large familiar clearing, Saderia felt herself grow weak with relief and it was only because of Dash and the leopard that she didn't stumble and fall. As soon as the nine of them burst into the clearing, they were immediately met with the gasps and stares of the leopards all around them. The crowd erupted in soft murmurs and Saderia winced when she caught hints of some of the whispers. In the entire crowd, she heard snatches of questions about her and her injuries, but the only thing she could hear clearly was one word. *Hateko*.

Flinching, she looked away, trying hard to avoid their gazes as her family led her into the clearing. She looked up only when she heard the sound of a familiar voice. Glancing around, she watched as Maeta pushed her way through the crowd of leopards, her voice echoing around the

clearing as she ordered them to move. The troubled leopard leader froze when she caught sight of Saderia. Wasting no time, she took one look at Karenisha and Makero and ordered, "Bring her to my house. I've got some gauze to wrap up her wounds and stop the bleeding," before turning and marching swiftly back in the direction of her home.

Without any words exchanged, the leopards slowly parted, casting curious glances at Saderia and Dash as they stumbled toward Maeta's house, their gazes trained on the ground. The creak of the door to Maeta's house sent a quick shiver up Saderia's spine when Karenisha and Makero pulled it open. The King and Queen watched them closely as they padded silently inside. Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash quickly followed as Saderia and Dash padded into the tiny front room of the house that reminded Saderia uncomfortably of a closet. At the sound of Maeta's voice, the six of them turned to see Maeta standing in the room to their right, a room separated by a chipped, worn archway.

After a slight hesitation, Saderia and Dash slowly padded forward into a room comprised entirely of a bed, two bedside tables on either side, and not much else in ways of furniture and floor space. Dash helped Saderia climb delicately onto the bed when Maeta ordered him to and sat back as Maeta leaned forward and took her paw gently in her own. Saderia bit down to conceal a sharp hiss of pain as the leopard leader carefully set her badly twisted paw back into place with a loud snap and rapidly began to wrap it up tightly with gauze. She tried not to complain when Maeta briskly cleaned her bleeding wounds and wrapped gauze around her grazed legs to prevent any other bleeding.

When at last Maeta had finished, she drew back, allowing Saderia the time to look around at the room. She quickly noticed that Dash was sitting as close to her as possible with his paw resting carefully next to hers while Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash sat behind her with expressions of worry and confusion. She watched as they looked up at Maeta with wide, questioning eyes.

Maeta met their gazes with calm brown eyes. "Saderia will be fine. She's all right except for a bit of shock and her paw will heal in just a matter of weeks." She paused and her gaze lingered on Saderia as she continued, "Now that I've seen to her wounds...I think it's time we all heard what's going on, why that tree fell on you, and why you both look so

pale.” Her brown gaze was dark. “What did you see in the forest, Princess Saderia?”

Saderia looked up at her with wide, scared eyes and took a deep breath, struggling to swallow her fear as she gazed into the leopard leader’s guarded brown eyes. Hateko’s wild green gaze flashed before her eyes. Turning desperately away, she let out a long breath before slowly whispering, “We saw what’s been making those sounds and what’s been terrorizing the forest.” Maeta’s eyes widened with hope and curiosity that quickly turned to alarm as Saderia began to describe all that had happened. After describing the first time she had snuck into the woods, leaving out the bit about Loki and Lisa going with them so as not to get them in trouble, she began describing the pool of blood she had seen in her last trip, along with the strange footprints she had found. As she struggled to explain the next part, she felt her heart skip in her chest.

“I’m so sorry,” Saderia whispered hoarsely to Maeta. “We started hearing these sounds and we hid, but then we saw Hateko come running out of the bushes and heard that awful sound, that *crack!* and...he’s dead.”

Maeta’s face paled with horror and she looked away. A few tears glistened in her dark brown eyes. She shook her head a few times as if in denial, muttering, “Oh, Marlina...Not Hateko, she won’t...Marlina...”

Sorrow filled Saderia’s heart with pain when she remembered that Hateko was Maeta’s brother-in-law...and the father of her sister’s unborn baby. She winced as Hateko’s stricken green stare flickered through her mind and his silent words echoed in her ears as loud as if they had been spoken. *Save my child...*

Saderia looked up and blinked the thoughts away when she saw Maeta pull herself to her paws, looking tired and defeated as she faced the door.

“The leopards will be sad to hear this,” she muttered.

Dash immediately stopped her from leaving. “Wait!” he said. “There’s more.”

Maeta paused and looked wearily back at him. “More?”

Karenisha and Makero looked up gravely, waiting for them to explain.

“We saw the creature who made those sounds and killed Hateko,” Saderia explained, feeling a shiver of dread when the image of the horrid

creature flashed through her mind.

Almost immediately, Maeta and Saderia's entire family let out gasps of surprise. All five of them leaned closer to them to hear what she had to say.

"Is that true?" Maeta demanded. "You know what did this?"

Saderia nodded with a sick feeling in her stomach as she began to describe the creature she had seen.

"A human!" Karenisha exclaimed when Saderia had finished her description. Her amber eyes widened in surprise as she stared at her daughter. Everyone but Makero looked confused as they turned to Karenisha for an explanation. "I've heard about them before," Karenisha told them. "They live in 'cities,' not forests. Some of them are harmless and leave us alone, but some, like the ones Saderia's describing, are killers. They use that black thing Saderia described—a gun—to kill animals at as distance without even giving them a chance. They can destroy a whole forest with that weapon."

Saderia's eyes widened in horror. "And one of those is lose in our forest?"

Maeta stood up abruptly. "I have to speak to my leopards. I'll be back." After one last glance back at them, she turned and walked swiftly out of the house, leaving them all in silence. Moments later they heard sounds from outside as Maeta began announcing all that had happened to the leopards.

Makero looked grave as he turned to Saderia. "There's probably more than one," he murmured. "They always tend to swarm to a place when they find out there's a lot of animals there to kill."

Dash gasped. "You mean the whole forest might be infested with them?!"

Saderia's amber eyes widened in horror as she looked up at the King and Queen. She felt her heart skip a beat when both of them gave them a grim nod.

"But they'll kill us all!" Saderia exclaimed. "We saw what they did to Hateko!" She shivered violently at the thought. "None of us will be safe!" she shouted. "What can we do?"

"There isn't anything we can do," Karenisha growled.

Saderia blinked in shock at her mother's dark tone and the way she was so quick to give up. "So you're just going to let those things kill us?! The forest will die! All of us will be gone forever! There's *got* to be *something* we can do!"

"Can't we stop them?" Dash echoed. "There's only a few of them, or maybe even one, and there's a lot of us, so can't we just get rid of them?"

Karenisha and Makero somberly shook their heads. "Not without heavy casualties. They can kill us at long-range," Makero replied. "They would take a lot more of us than we could take of them. We'd have to fight hard to kill them, whereas they only need one shot to destroy us. And even though there might only be a few of them right now, if we kill one, another will just run back to where it came from and get reinforcements to destroy us. We can't win."

"So all we can do is wait to be slaughtered?" Saderia gasped.

The room fell silent as Karenisha and Makero exchanged dark, serious glances. Cia and Uncle Jash studied their expressions with looks of sheer horror. Saderia and Dash stared desperately at the King and Queen, their amber eyes wide with fear and desperation as the silence lengthened. The air was suddenly thick with the feelings of hopelessness and defeat.

After what felt like ages, Karenisha finally murmured, "There is one way to save the forest, but it is very dangerous. It might be close to impossible to do...but it is a way, the only way."

"How?" Saderia pleaded. "How can we save the forest? I'll do anything. How?"

Again, Karenisha hesitated and when she spoke, her voice was quiet and sad. "The humans, hunters as these ones are called, won't leave as long as they can kill us and the littler woods animals. For as long as the forest animals live, they will terrorize us...if we stay here. The only way to save the forest is to evacuate it."

Saderia blinked in shock and horror at her mother's words. Dash let out a gasp and tensed beside her. Cia and Uncle Jash's eyes widened with shock and disbelief as they whirled around to stare at the Queen.

"What...what are you saying?" Saderia stammered.

Karenisha and Makero exchanged a glance and bowed their heads. After a long moment, Karenisha slowly looked up, her amber eyes bright with sorrow.

“We will have to leave the forest.”



# Chapter Six

## Tormented

“Die,” Bone snarled as he stalked past Dingo, completely ignoring his vain attempts at friendliness.

Dingo sighed as he watched him storm over to Rock and Rip, immediately deciding to avoid him when he saw the dark, angry gleam in Bone’s narrowed amber eyes. Unfortunately, his brother seemed to have different plans because after talking with Rock for a moment and leaving Rip to go off and find Tear, Bone turned back to Dingo with a careful, less hateful glance and growled, “On second thought, why don’t we go out hunting today?”

Dingo blinked several times. “What?” He curled his lip in confusion. “You just told me to die and now you want to go hunting?”

Bone narrowed his eyes. “The Leader’s getting on my nerves making me do everything, so I’m not in the greatest mood. Is that such a problem?”

Not really, Dingo decided, considering Bone told him to die on a regular basis. He arched an eyebrow. “So being the Leader’s slave isn’t all its cracked up to be, huh?”

Bone pricked his ears. “What’d you say?”

“Nothing,” Dingo said, glancing nervously at his paws. He looked back up at Bone a second later, his light brown eyes narrowed in befuddlement. “Anyway...I guess we can go hunting if you want.” He shrugged awkwardly while Bone just nodded.

“What should I tell your Dad if he wants you to do something, Bone?” Rock asked as he padded up behind them.

“Tell him to bite a cactus or jump into the Snake Pit for all I care,” Bone growled, glaring at Rock out of the corner of his eye and stalking away. “I haven’t been out of camp all day and I’m starving, so he can get off my back.”

“You know, you wouldn’t have this little problem if you killed him and became Leader,” Rock called as Dingo cautiously began to follow his brother.

Bone stopped and let out a low, frustrated snarl. “Dagger won’t live forever, Rock. Stop pestering me about it.”

“Yeah, well, his death is long overdue,” Rock replied bitterly before stalking away, muttering something too low for Dingo or Bone to catch.

“Nice friend,” Dingo commented to Bone when Rock had left.

Bone glared at him. “I don’t see you with a bunch of great ‘friends,’” he retorted.

Dingo flicked his ears. “Touché.” Falling into step beside his brother as Bone led him toward the entrance of the camp, he said, “I don’t see how you and your ‘friend’ can talk about some dingo’s death all the time.”

“Don’t start preaching, Dingo. Besides, don’t *you* want Dagger to die?”

“That’s beside the point. At least I don’t go around talking about it.”

Bone snorted. “Yeah right. I can only imagine some of the things you and Claw must have talked about when she was alive.” Though the retort seemed light, there was a hard, warning edge to Bone’s voice that Dingo didn’t understand.

He frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

Bone just shook his head and growled as he walked on through the desert, pushing past Dingo and not bothering to answer the question. Trying to shake off the warning and his sudden gnawing suspicion, Dingo hesitantly followed after him as the two of them made their way deeper into the desert.

Thinking about Bone and Rock’s conversations, Dingo couldn’t help but ask, “Why’s Rock always pestering you?”

Bone rolled his eyes. “I never should have said I’d make him Second in Command when I become Leader.”

“But you wouldn’t really kill Dagger, right?”

Bone glared at him in annoyance. “What’s it to you? What I do is my business.”

Dingo’s eyes widened. “So you *would* kill him?”

Bone let out an aggravated sigh. “Would you calm down, Dingo? In case you hadn’t noticed, killing is common in the pack, whether you like it

or not. It doesn't matter anyway. Dagger's getting old and he'll probably die soon, so why should I even need to kill him?"

"There's also the fact that he's our father," Dingo pointed out flatly.

Bone raised an eyebrow. "Why should I care about that? Come on, Dingo. Don't try to deny that you want him dead even though you're his son, too."

Dingo looked away. He did hate Dagger for his cruel, lawless Leadership, but for the most part he was easy to ignore. Dingo usually didn't waste his time wishing Dagger would die. Still, he wouldn't exactly be heartbroken if it happened.

Bone smirked. "I knew you wouldn't be able to deny it. You want Dagger dead and I bet you want me dead, too."

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "That's not true."

"Yeah right. Why wouldn't you want me dead?"

Dingo rolled his eyes in annoyance. "We grew up together?"

"So?"

He sighed. "Just because you have no loyalty doesn't mean I don't. You're still my brother even if you get on my nerves."

"You get on my nerves, too, *brother*." He paused then sneered. "So who else do you want dead?"

"I'm not comfortable talking about this," Dingo told him evasively.

Bone just rolled his eyes, looking bored. "Then what *do* you want to talk about?"

"Why don't you tell me why you said you were glad Claw's dead?" Dingo growled, suddenly furious as the memories returned.

Bone narrowed his eyes. "Just because *you* hero worshiped her doesn't mean the rest of us thought she was so great."

Dingo flattened his ears. "I didn't hero worship her!"

"Could've fooled me," he retorted. "You still keep a shrine of her stuff, don't you?"

"I just keep the ribbon she used to wear and her journal and that's only because I miss her! Is that so wrong?" Dingo let out a low snarl.

"Around here, yeah. It makes you weak, but I suppose you're the expert on that."

Dingo sighed. "Can we just drop this?"

“Fine by me.” Bone shot him a dark glare. “In that case, why don’t you tell me how it felt when everyone you liked ended up dead?”

Dingo winced and narrowed his eyes. He opened his mouth to growl at him, but then stopped with a long, weary sigh when he realized it was pointless. He let out a long, tired breath. “Bone, why can’t we ever get along?”

“Because I’m right and you’re wrong,” Bone replied, keeping his indifferent gaze trained ahead.

Dingo rolled his eyes. “Fine, have it your way. Do you always have to be so cold to me, though? Do you constantly have to go at my throat?”

“Yeah, because dingoes like you deserve to suffer. Like Claw did.”

“Stop talking about her!” Dingo exclaimed, lashing his tail furiously back and forth. Why was Bone always dragging her into their conversations?

Bone glared at him. “Look, Dingo. You’re one of those rare different dingoes that deserves to suffer and then die. Why we kept you in camp for so long, I don’t know. I, on the other hand, am the oldest of the Leader’s pups as well as Second in Command, the most powerful dingo in camp besides the Leader who will be gone soon. I can hardly believe we have the same parents, but unfortunately we do. *That’s* why we can never get along. It’s just bad luck that we happen to be brothers.”

“Well, thanks for the vote of confidence,” Dingo replied flatly.

Bone snorted. “You know you don’t deserve to live.”

Dingo sighed, his ears drooping. “Fine, I guess you’re right.”

“I’m always right. And you’re always wrong.”

“*Fine.*” Dingo let out a long, frustrated sigh. “If you just wanted to growl at me then why’d we have to leave camp?”

“Like I said, I’m hungry and I’m tired of Rock bugging me to kill Dagger and Rip and Tear annoying me,” he replied, stalking forward.

Dingo raised an eyebrow. “So you’d rather listen to my ‘different dingo rants’? Wow, I feel privileged.”

“Shut up and come on,” Bone growled.

Dingo just rolled his eyes and followed. “Speaking of Rip and Tear *annoying* you, if you want to see hero worship just look at how they treat you.”

Bone gave him a superior grin. "I can't help it I'm so special everyone looks up to me."

"Careful, Bone. If your head gets any bigger, it'll pop."

The dark brown dingo just rolled his eyes at him with a low growl before bounding forward with Dingo running faster to keep pace with him.

"Where are we going?" Dingo asked as they ran.

"You'll see."

With a shrug, Dingo fell silent as he fell into step beside Bone, glancing around at the passing sand dunes and running faster to keep up with him. He didn't bother to pay attention to where he was going since he had already assumed his brother was leading him to one of their usual hunting places. He glanced up at the sky with a tinge of boredom in his eyes as he raced obliviously onward, hoping his less than pleasant trip with Bone would soon be over.

After several moments, Dingo glanced over at Bone and frowned when he saw the dark, serious glint in his brother's eyes. He narrowed his eyes uneasily, wondering what the dark Second in Command was thinking and why he seemed so grave. Shrugging it off, Dingo tore his eyes off of him and continue moving, only to freeze with a gasp of shock when he looked ahead and saw where they were headed. Digging his paws deep into the sand to stop himself, Dingo felt a jolt of fear when he skidded to a halt just a few feet away from a sand dune hiding the most deadly place in the desert.

His eyes widened in shock. "This is the way to the Snake Pit!" he exclaimed. He whirled around to face his brother and felt his blood run cold when he realized Bone was no longer beside him.

"So it is." Dingo let out a gasp and whirled around just in time to see Bone lunge at him. Unprepared, Dingo let out a yelp of surprise as Bone pushed him onto the ground, a cold, predatory gleam in his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Dingo shouted as he struggled to get free.

"Getting rid of a pest," Bone bared his fangs in a snarl and lunged for his throat.

Before Bone could sink his teeth into his flesh, Dingo gave a sharp tug and struggled out of his grasp before leaping to his paws. Bone growled in annoyance and leapt after him, but Dingo dodged away, backing away from the direction of the Snake Pit despite Bone's attempts to chase him

that way. Dingo ducked away from Bone's vicious attacks and tried to get away, but Bone kept blocking him, trying to push him in the direction of the chasm just over the next sand dune. Dingo didn't want to think Bone was cold enough to push his own brother into the Snake Pit, but he wasn't taking his chances. With a growl, he dodged around him to race back to camp.

Bone whirled around, leaping onto his shoulders and forcing him to the ground as his claws scraped painfully against Dingo's back. Dingo let out a howl and fought to get free until he was finally able to twist around and smack Bone with his paw. Struggling frantically to his paws, he tried to run away, but the dark brown dingo blocked his escape. With a tinge of fear, Dingo knew that if he didn't fight, there was no way he could escape.

When Bone leapt at him with a hateful snarl, Dingo dodged to the left and slammed into Bone's side to try to push him to the ground. But his brother was heavier than him and as Dingo tried to shove him away, Bone whirled around to grab Dingo's leg in his fangs and jerk it away from him so that he fell to the ground. With a howl of pain, Dingo smacked against the sandy ground, trying not to wince as he rolled away and leapt to his paws. Bone tried to smack him, but Dingo stumbled away to anticipate his brother's next attack, ignoring the blood oozing through his fur.

"Why are you doing this?" Dingo demanded.

"I want you dead," Bone replied. He glared at him. "And since when do you know how to fight?" With a snarl, he jumped at Dingo and tried to overpower him, but Dingo quickly leapt to the side and scrambled away. When Dingo managed to race a few paces away from his brother, he paused and looked at Bone in shock and distress. Was his own brother really trying to kill him?

"What did I ever do to you?" Dingo howled.

"You're different," Bone growled, mostly ignoring him. "And you know things. For that, you're going to die."

Dingo blinked in shock. "Know things? What does that mean? What things?"

"Don't act stupid," Bone snarled, lunging at him. He knocked Dingo down, but Dingo managed to leap away before Bone could do more than claw him. His brother was after him in an instant, his amber eyes glowing with hatred.

Dingo's mind whirled as he darted away from Bone, feeling terror shoot up his spine with every step he took. Bone's words echoed in his mind. What was he talking about? With a look of utter confusion, Dingo paused to look back and let out a loud yelp of alarm when Bone's paws met his shoulders and shoved him heavily to the ground. Letting out a yelp of pain, Dingo squeezed his eyes shut as his back slammed against the desert floor. Bone's claws dug deep, bloody trails into his shoulders and pain surged through his body, leaving him burning with agony.

Dingo's stunned light brown eyes slowly rolled up to meet Bone's face and he froze when he read the malice in their cruel amber depths. Shaking off a shiver of fear, Dingo suddenly narrowed his eyes as a rush of fury coursed through his bleeding body. With an unexpected burst of strength, he kicked Bone away from him and stumbled several paces away from his brother, glaring at him with dark, outraged eyes. Whatever Bone's problem was now, he had been tormenting him for years and Dingo was sick of it.

"Enough of this, Bone!" he shouted. "What's your problem this time? Tell me why you're attacking me and while you're at it, why don't you tell me why you've been tormenting me all these years? Don't say it's because I'm *different*. Why have you been even colder to me within the last year?"

Bone glared at him loathingly. "Don't you get it, you idiot? I've hated you from the moment we were born and I've wanted to kill you for a long time. I was hoping one of the other dingoes would kill you for me, but you always manage to get away somehow. So I have to do it myself."

"You really want to *kill* me?" He couldn't help but feel a tinge of betrayal. "But...we're brothers..."

"Don't give me that again, Dingo," Bone growled. "You're nothing to me except an annoying problem to get rid of. Just like your sister."

Dingo's light brown eyes widened in shock. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. With a growing sense of horror, Dingo stared at Bone, his whole body going numb as a violent shiver raced down his spine. He suddenly felt hollow, as if everything was falling apart around him. Bone *couldn't* be saying what he thought he was saying...Bone wasn't that cruel, was he? Bone couldn't have murdered Claw...could he?

“What...what do you mean by that?” Dingo demanded, shaking with a terrible cold in the blistering hot air of the desert.

“Idiot,” Bone muttered. “I guess you don’t have *everything* figured out.”

“What are you talking about?” he shouted.

Bone snorted. “You know things about me that I can’t let you spread around. Incriminating things. You know too much, thanks to nosy Claw.”

Dingo didn’t know what that meant, but he immediately narrowed his eyes when Bone mentioned his sister. “Don’t talk about her that way!”

Rolling his eyes, Bone growled, “Don’t you have more important things to worry about? Like the fact that you’re about to die, maybe?” Dingo shivered as he went on, “I’ll get away with killing you, too, since I can just say some outcast killed you. You’re weak enough for them to believe it. After all, they believed that’s how Claw died, didn’t they?” Dingo’s eyes widened; what was Bone implying? “And even if they do find out I killed you, they won’t care because you’re different and I’m Second in Command. I can do whatever I want.”

Dingo stared at him in horror, not quite able to believe that his own brother hated him so much. His mind whirled with shock and confusion as he struggled desperately to understand. What ‘things’ did Bone think he knew about? “What...” he began.

Bone rolled his eyes and cut him off. “I’m sick of your stupid questions.” Without any more warning, Bone leapt at him and pinned him to the ground, letting out a furious snarl as he lunged for his throat. Dingo kicked him away and sank his fangs into Bone’s leg to get him to back off.

As they fought, matching each other blow for blow, Dingo’s eyes narrowed and a furious growl tore out of his chest. “What did you mean when you said ‘Just like your sister?’” he demanded.

Bone narrowed his eyes at him and instead of answering the question, he snarled, “If you want someone to blame for her murder, blame yourself. You’re the one who wasn’t there to save her. Some great brother you are.”

He wasn’t making any sense, but Dingo flinched when Bone struck a hit. For a moment, Dingo considered just giving up and letting Bone kill him. It would be a nice reprieve from the aching grief and guilt he knew would haunt him for the rest of his life. Bone was right when he said it was



his fault Claw had died no matter what had happened to her so why didn't he just give up? Sadly, he knew he couldn't; he had already promised Claw he wouldn't.

Trying to fight the guilt and pain, Dingo glared at Bone. "Fine, it was my fault, but I'm not going to just lay down and die for you."

"Too bad," Bone growled. "When did you learn how to fight anyway?"

Ignoring the comment, Dingo demanded, "Can you stop talking riddles and just tell me what's going on?"

Bone glared at him. "Let's put it this way. You've been a thorn in my side since we were born. You and Claw, that is. You should have died a long time ago, so be grateful you got to live for twelve years. I've wanted you dead even before Claw started snooping around in my business. But then Claw *did* go and start peeping around in places she didn't belong and she learned something incriminating. She's gone now, so she can't tell anyone, but she might have told you before she was murdered. And in case she did tell you something about me, I have to eliminate you."

Letting out a furious snarl, Dingo shoved him away and raced back to the dingo camp, seeing his opportunity. Bone snarled in frustration and chased after him, but Dingo ran faster, ignoring his exhaustion from the fight and the blood dripping down his face. His paws thudded violently against the ground as he raced to get away, his eyes searching desperately for the only place he might be safe. His heart leapt with hope when he spotted the familiar entrance to the camp, but just as he drew close enough to see the dens, Bone leapt in front of him and let out a snarl.

"Do you really think you'll be protected in there?" he growled. "Do you think the other dingoes would care if I killed you?"

"Apparently *you* think so since you went to the trouble of bringing me out in the desert to kill me," Dingo retorted, trying to hide a shiver of doubt and fear.

"It would be better to kill you outside of camp, but it doesn't matter if I kill you out here or in there. I'll still have all the power," Bone replied.

"You won't have *all* the power, Bone," he said quickly, trying desperately to think of something to save himself. "According to the twisted 'laws' around here, the only 'legal' way you can kill a dingo in camp and

get away with it is if *both* dingoes and the pack Leader agree to a fight to the death. And I *don't* agree."

"I think we can make an exception for you."

"Fine, but if you kill me outside of a 'fair' fight then the other dingoes will take that as an example and stop worrying about that 'fair' fight thing where everyone has to agree. They'll go around killing each other, regardless of whether you give them permission or not. The whole pack will end up dead eventually and you won't have any control over them in the meantime. Is that really what you want, Bone?" It would probably get like that eventually, but he wanted to keep that from happening as long as he could and he knew Bone would want to do the same since he wouldn't have any power if that happened; the whole pack would just become even more barbaric and wouldn't listen to a Leader or Second in Command anymore.

Bone hesitated then growled uncertainly, "Killing *you* won't cause that."

"Maybe not immediately, but it'll bring it on sooner," Dingo replied.

Bone paused for a very long time then narrowed his eyes. "Fine, Dingo, you've won for now and I'll let you live a little longer, but I'll make sure you're dealt with soon." Turning around, he snarled over his shoulder, "And in the meantime, don't think I won't make you suffer for this."

"I've already suffered for twelve years," Dingo retorted. "What more can you possibly do to me?"

"You'd be surprised." Bone growled over his shoulder as he stalked away, his amber eyes cold and hateful. "Sleep well tonight," he added as he stormed into camp.

Shaking his head in disbelief at what had just happened, Dingo walked slowly toward his empty den, feeling weak with pain and confusion as he tried to understand everything Bone had said. As he padded lifelessly into his den and slumped down on the rough, rocky floor, he let out a long sigh and closed his eyes.

Everything Bone had said swirled through his mind. Though he was almost afraid to know, Dingo found himself wondering exactly what kind of 'things' Bone thought he knew and why he seemed so convinced of it. With all that Bone had done and all that he was, what more could he possibly be trying to hide? Why would he feel the need to hide anything when he was

so powerful in the already lawless pack? Dingo's head slumped against the ground and he winced when pain shot up his aching neck. A deep anguish rose in his aching chest as he remembered what Bone had said about Claw.

Slowly he raised his head to look out at camp, his brown eyes widening in fear when he caught Bone's stormy glare. His tail twitched nervously as Bone's words poisoned his mind. Bone would kill him. That much was clear. But was Dingo his first victim or simply his next?

When the sun rose in the sky, casting hot, blinding light out across the sandy hills of the desert, Dingo could barely make himself get up. After an entire night of hardly any sleep at all, his body felt sore and exhausted. With a smothered groan, he slowly started to pull himself to his paws and stumble out of his den to see what was going on out in the rest of the camp. Blinking rapidly against the sudden harsh light of the sun, he glanced around and realized his brothers, Rip and Tear, had already left the den to go talk with Bone near the water trough. When Bone looked up and saw him standing weakly in the entrance to his den, he narrowed his eyes and let out a silent growl. Thankfully, before Bone could walk over to him, they both heard Dagger call for his Second in Command.

After giving him one last glare, Bone stalked over to the Leader and sat in front of him just outside the Leader and Second in Command dens. Dingo saw Rip and Tear exchange glances before casually walking over to them to try to listen in on what Dagger was telling Bone. Dingo usually didn't care enough about what they were saying to risk getting yelled at for eavesdropping, but this time he walked over as casually as Rip and Tear and cautiously listened in.

"Some of the other dingoes and I have heard strange sounds coming from the forest," Dagger was telling Bone.

Dingo pricked his ears and listened more intently now that he knew they were talking about one of the forests that bordered their desert. Those forests had always interested him. One was bigger and more 'natural' and the dingoes called it 'the normal one.' The other one was smaller and *stranger*. The place had always seemed a bit odd because of its weird, unnatural appearance as well as the creepy but probably accurate myths he had heard about it; the dingoes dubbed it 'the weird forest.'

Bone didn't seem as interested as Dingo as he asked, "Which forest? The one on the left—the normal one? Or the one on the right—the weird one?"

"The normal one," Dagger replied. "We've been hearing these strange noises coming from it. We've never heard anything like them before."

"I haven't been over there lately; I'll have to check it out," Bone muttered with a yawn. "But what's it got to do with us?"

"I think something bad might be going on in the forest."

Dingo felt a prickle of fear and sympathy for the forest animals. He wasn't quite sure what was going on in the forest, but he didn't want any animal to suffer. Maybe he would go over there soon to see what was going on, too.

Bone didn't seem to care, which didn't surprise Dingo. "So?" he asked, sounding bored. "If there is, that's the forest food's problem, not ours."

"True," Dagger agreed. "But we don't want the problem spreading to us. I doubt it *would* since only *we* can survive in the desert, but we should make sure it leaves us alone. And besides, if something's scaring the forest food, it might chase them into the desert and we can hunt them down."

"Good point. I'll make sure we keep an eye on the forest," Bone agreed before walking away when Dagger dismissed him.

Dingo sat back as Bone stalked off, wondering about what could be going on in the forest, and if the animals there were all right. He had heard about the kinds of animals that lived in the forest: lions, tigers, cheetahs... They all seemed strange to him, but also kind of interesting. He hoped they were okay and decided to visit the edge of the forest later on to try to find out what Dagger was talking about. At the same time, he wondered why he cared so much. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to figure it out because he suddenly looked up and saw Bone glaring at him.

Dingo jumped then let out a long sigh although he still felt a prickle of fear and unease, remembering yesterday. "What do you want, Bone?"

"Were you listening in on my conversation?" he demanded.

Dingo rolled his eyes. "*Of course*, the one time I *did* listen in, you'd growl at me for it. Rip and Tear do it all the time, in case you hadn't

noticed.”

Bone narrowed his eyes and glared at him for a long time before letting a sneer spread across his face. “How’d you sleep last night, Dingo?”

Dingo felt a growl rising in his throat at the taunt. “Just fine, thanks.”

He could tell his brother was silently laughing at him. “Good to know,” Bone replied.

Dingo narrowed his eyes when he read the triumph in his brother’s gaze, feeling his blood burn with anger. He curled his lip. “So Bone, you think Dagger’s getting annoyed that you’re not doing everything he asks like a good little slave—I mean, *Second in Command*?”

Bone narrowed his eyes. “Let’s just say, I can’t wait for him to die.”

Dingo snorted. “Do you like *any* of your family, Bone?”

“I think I made it pretty clear that I think my family’s worthless. You’re idiotic and nosy, like Claw was, and Dagger, our ‘father,’ is just stupid and annoying.”

“And our mother, Sand? And Rip and Tear?”

“I barely even know Sand. As for Rip and Tear, they’re pathetic and they need lives.”

Dingo sighed bitterly. “I think I get the picture.”

“Good, it’s about time. And you should talk about treating *family* members well. You sucked the life out of Claw even before she died, always depending on her to save you. It’s a wonder you didn’t just curl up and die when she was killed.”

Dingo gritted his teeth and dug his claws deep into the sand. As steadily as he could, he asked, “Why does the conversation always come back to Claw, Bone?”

“Because it bothers you.”

“Is that all?”

His brother glared at him. “I think you know that’s not all, but in case you don’t, I’m not saying anything. Think of this as a warning not to mess with me, and maybe you’ll live a few more days.”

“You’ve already made it clear that you’re going to kill me, so why shouldn’t I mess with you? Let’s just say I actually know what you’re talking about.”

Bone narrowed his eyes. "You've been warned and I *will* find a way to get rid of you. You're as weak as you let on even if you do know how to fight. You actually care about things like loyalty and honesty, whereas I don't. You'll never win that way and you know it as well as I do. I'll always win and you'll always lose, just like Claw."

Dingo glared. "One day you're going to get what's coming to you."

Bone just laughed. "I highly doubt that, considering I can get away with murder around here. And I know one thing: I'm not going to get it from you. If it's a fight to the death between us, I'll win every time and you know it."

"I can fight if I have to," Dingo protested.

"Yeah, but we're brothers," Bone mocked. "You'd never kill me."

Dingo snarled at him then looked down with a inward sigh. "Fine, I could never kill you. Are you happy now?"

"I'll be happy when you're dead," he growled before he turned and stalked away.

Dingo stared after him as he stormed off into the camp, not quite sure what to feel. He thought about what he had said and knew he would never be able to kill Bone because he did feel some loyalty to his brother. He didn't think he could ever kill anybody, much less a dingo he had grown up with. With a feeling of regret, he realized that Bone probably would win eventually. Shaking it off, he tried to tell himself it didn't matter. Bone hadn't killed him yet and in the time before he did, Dingo still wanted to find out what he had been hinting at. There was something in Bone's past that Claw had apparently known about and that Dingo was desperate to figure out.

For a long time, he sat still, wondering what it could be and feeling almost dizzy with all of his questions. Finally he shook his head, knowing he had no way of figuring it out, especially when some part of him didn't *want* to understand it. But as he got up to walk back to his den, he couldn't help thinking about what Bone had said with a scary new perspective. *I can get away with murder...* It was just an expression, but Dingo suddenly couldn't help wondering if, to Bone, it was a lot more than that.

# Chapter Seven

## The Only Option

***“Leave the forest?!”*** Saderia gasped in horror at the thought. The forest had always been her home, a place where she had always felt safe and happy. She loved racing through the woods and exploring them with her friend; it was where she belonged. Her entire body seemed to shiver with despair and a dark sense of loss as she tried to think about such an awful change.

Even if they could leave, where would they go? The forest was the only place she had ever known; she almost couldn’t believe there was anything in the world besides her beautiful home. And how could they just take all of the forest animals and make them travel somewhere else without even knowing *where* they were going?

“We can’t leave...” Dash gasped beside her. “The forest...it’s our home!”

With wide, frightened eyes, Saderia spared a glance at Dash’s stunned expression before turning back to look at her parents. A shiver of dread shot down her spine when she read the solemnity in the King and Queen’s green and amber gazes.

“It’s the only way,” Karenisha whispered.

“They’re hunters,” Makero growled. “You can’t fight them, you can’t run away from them. As long as they’re lose in our home, every one of us will die. We have no other option but to leave the forest for good.”

“They’ll never leave?” Saderia whispered.

“Not as long as we’re around for them to hunt,” Karenisha murmured. “I don’t want to leave any more than you do. This forest has always been my home; I grew up playing in the woods and looking out for all of the kingdom’s animals. But I have to protect the kingdom.” She paused. “However...the other forest animals might not see it that way. It will take a lot to convince them to leave. A lot of them would rather die in the place where they’ve grown up than leave to find a new place to live.”

Saderia opened her mouth to reply, to protest, but nothing came out. She sat back with a suppressed shudder, her eyes darting around at all the scared, haunted faces of her family members. Her head ached with fear and confusion as she tried desperately to understand what was happening and what she should feel. Should she want to leave her forest or should she fight for the right to stay in the only safe place she had ever known? Her gaze darkened as she struggled to picture another forest and she felt a flash of dismay when she realized she couldn't even imagine it.

If they did leave...how would she ever be able to cope? What would it be like to wake up every morning in a different room in a different house in a different forest? How would she feel when she went outside to go to school in a different building and found herself struggling to navigate a forest she might never get used to? What would she see if she gazed out at the woods around her; would the trees and bushes look the same and would the grass still feel soft under her paws? She shivered. What would it be like to leave all of the forest's history behind and start all over again in a strange, foreign land? What would it be like to someday be Queen of another forest and another generation of forest animals that barely even knew their old home existed?

Her striped body quivered with horror as she faced such a different future, but even as she found herself longing to stay in the forest, she realized that if what her parents had said was true, her home would soon be unrecognizable. The cheerful, thriving forest she had once known would be cloaked in fear. It would be as if they actually had moved to another forest. What would it be like to wake up in fear every morning until the too-soon end of her life? How would she feel when she heard the horrible sound that had marked Hateko's death every day? What would she see when all of the forest animals began hiding in their dens, leaving the rest of the forest empty of any life?

A sharp image of wild, desperate green eyes flashed through her mind, tearing a deep shudder out of her body. Hateko's scared green gaze burned in her mind as she recalled his last, unspoken wish. *Save my child.* What would it be like to see Hateko's baby be born in a forest riddled with fear and death? To watch as it was forced to stay inside for protection rather than be allowed to go out and play? What would it be like to see Hateko's last hope go to waste and to spend the rest of her life seeing the same



desperate look in the eyes of so many other animals when she knew she could not do what their eyes were silently begging for: save them.

Suppressing a cold shiver, she looked up only when her mother's voice broke through her thoughts.

"Saderia," the Queen whispered. "...Do you think we should leave?"

Letting out a soft sigh, Saderia carefully looked down as she whispered, "Yes. It's the only way."

Dash turned to her in horror. "What?" he exclaimed. "We...we can't leave!"

Saderia looked away as she carefully began to explain, all the while wishing there was another way. "We can't let the kingdom suffer the same fate Hateko did," she whispered once she had finished. "Leaving is our only option."

Dash winced and looked down. "I guess you're right. But where would we go?"

Saderia looked to her parents hopefully, feeling her heart sink and her hopes plummet when they shook their heads. "I don't know where we could go. We'd just have to start walking and hope for the best," Karenisha muttered. "Unfortunately, I can't see the forest animals agreeing to it and trying to get them to come could prove to be close to impossible. Not to mention, there could be thousands of dangers we might have to face on our journey to find a new home, which could take ages."

"But there's got to be a way to get the others to come with us to find a new home and there's got to be another home for us to find," Saderia pleaded. "We at least have to warn the kingdom and tell them what's going on. Maybe they'll eventually realize that leaving is the only option." Even as she tried to be optimistic, Saderia knew it would take a lot more for the forest to accept that decision, and if they ever did, it would only be because they had all endured terrible hardship.

"All we can do is warn the kingdom about what's going on," Makero told them grimly. "We can tell them about our plan to leave, but whether they accept it or not is their decision."

Saderia let out a long sigh. "Well, if that's all we can do, then I guess we'll just have to wait and see what happens. But if we're going to warn them, we should do it soon." She tried to climb down from the bed she

was laying on, but before her paws even touched the ground, Karenisha immediately darted forward and stopped her.

“You’re not going anywhere until we’re sure you’re okay,” she said sternly, giving her daughter a hard look. “And don’t you *ever* do anything like that *again*! You *knew* there was something dangerous in that woods, but you went anyway. After we told you to stay away! *Hunters* were running around in that woods! You could have been killed.”

Saderia swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t know. I thought...”

“No, you didn’t,” she growled. “Next time, be a bit smarter about where you go snooping around and listen to us when we tell you not to go somewhere.”

Saderia bit back an angry retort and a reminder that they wouldn’t know what was terrorizing the forest if it wasn’t for her. She didn’t want to fight with her mother, so she just kept silent and nodded meekly. Beside her, Dash paled and looked away in shame.

Karenisha let out a long sigh as she whirled around and headed toward the door, calling, “I’m going to talk with Maeta and see when you’ll be well enough to leave the bed, Saderia.” Her tail flicked distressfully as she stalked through the archway and disappeared behind the dirty wall.

After the door to Maeta’s house slammed shut, Makero turned and gave Saderia and Dash a gentle look. “Your mother’s just afraid, Saderia. But she’s right; you shouldn’t have gone to a place so dangerous, especially after we told you not to.”

She sighed. “I really am sorry, Dad. I just wanted to help.”

“I know you did,” he said with a weak smile. He looked over her wounds carefully before adding, “And don’t worry about your wounds. You were lucky to come out of that ordeal with only a few injuries and Maeta’s an expert at healing. I think you’ll be fine.”

“That’s good,” she murmured while Dash let out a long breath of relief. When she glanced over at him, however, she realized how tense he seemed. As she watched him, she noticed he never once looked up at her or Makero. Her friend was obviously punishing himself a lot more than she or her family ever would.

A loud slam jolted Saderia out of her thoughts, making her look up in surprise as her mother padded anxiously into the room. Her amber eyes

were dark and her striped face was shadowed with concern as she padded toward them and stopped just below the archway. “Maeta says you’ll be fine, Saderia, but your front paw was badly twisted, so try not to put too much weight on it. Eventually it’ll heal.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Saderia murmured, struggling to pull herself off of the bed without putting any weight on her injured paw. Almost instantly, Dash leapt to his paws and let her lean against him so that she didn’t have to worry about hurting it. Saderia flashed him a grateful glance before turning back to the Queen and asking, “Are we going to call a forest meeting now?”

“In a moment. First, we’re going to talk to Maeta and see if she and the leopards agree to leaving the forest since they’ve had the most exposure to this problem. It might make it just a little bit easier to convince the rest of the forest animals to leave if we have a large group of animals to agree with us and tell them about what has been going on in Twisted Creek Woods.”

Saderia nodded thoughtfully. “Should I come, too?”

“Yes, all of you should come.”

Cia and Uncle Jash, although still seeming shocked, silently pulled themselves to their paws and walked numbly over to Karenisha. Saderia and Dash carefully began to stumble toward the Queen, but Makero called them back. “Dash, stay here and let Karenisha guide Saderia instead,” he instructed him with a gentle expression.

Dash blinked in surprise then nodded and silently led Saderia over to where Karenisha was waiting in the chipped archway. Karenisha managed a weak smile as she stepped forward and pressed closer to Saderia to support her, seeming to know what Makero wanted to talk to Dash about. “I’ll help Saderia so you can stay here,” she murmured. “You can join us in a moment, Dash.”

He hesitated before cautiously stepping away from Saderia and drawing back so that Karenisha could take his place. When he was sure Saderia would be okay, he slowly padded back toward Makero, giving Saderia a weak smile as the two tigers turned and began padding to another room in the tiny house.

Saderia smiled sadly back at her friend before letting the smile droop miserably off her face when he and the rest of the tiny room disappeared from sight. Letting out a sigh, Saderia looked up as her mother led her to a door to the right of Maeta’s tiny bedroom. She paused as the

Queen carefully pushed aside the cracked wooden door, revealing a room only slightly bigger than the bedroom. Trying not to wince at her stinging paw, Saderia glanced half-heartedly at the stark, chipped table that stood on the right side of the room next to an archway that led to a kitchen almost as small as the closet-like front room. She swung her gaze around to the bare left side of the room and gasped with surprise when she recognized the animal sitting next to Maeta on a faded, threadbare carpet.

She blinked in surprise. “Loki?” she exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

At the sound of her name, the cheetah slowly looked up at her, her pale, worried face brightening when she saw Saderia. “What do you think I’m doing here?” she replied, sounding a bit like her old self. “I heard you almost got killed and I had to make sure you were all right.”

“I’m fine,” Saderia assured her as Karenisha led her over to the carpet and helped her sit down next to Loki.

“That’s what Maeta told me, but I had to see for myself.” Loki glanced at Karenisha and then looked back at Saderia. “Maeta just told us all about Hateko,” she murmured, her voice quivering as she stared at the ground. “His wife, Marlina, isn’t doing well, but some friends are looking after her while Maeta is here.” After a quick glance at the leopard leader, she added, “Maeta also told us you found out what’s out there...”

“And it’s time to decide what to do about it,” Maeta interrupted. At the sound of her voice, Loki instantly quieted and sat up straighter. “These are grave matters,” Maeta went on. “And this *thing* in the woods might be the most dangerous thing we’ve ever had to face.”

Loki nodded respectfully, looking attentive and serious in a way Saderia had never seen before.

“Loki, are you staying with us for the meeting?” Karenisha asked her.

“Yes, K— er, *Queen* Karenisha,” Loki amended with a brief nod to the Queen.

“If you don’t mind, I’ve asked her to be here,” Maeta put in.

“That’s fine,” Karenisha replied before sitting back and carefully telling them about the hunters and what Saderia had seen. “I think the only thing that’s left for us to do is leave the forest,” she finished gravely.

Loki let out a gasp, her green eyes wide with shock, but she said nothing while Maeta considered it. After a long hesitation, she finally murmured, “You say these hunters will spread to the whole forest, Queen Karenisha?”

She nodded grimly. “Soon, we will all be afraid to leave our homes.”

Saderia shuddered while Loki gaped at her in horror. Maeta was silent for what seemed like an eternity before she finally let out a long, weary sigh. “We’ve known that something bad was happening in Twisted Creek Woods and I think you’re right. If they heard the whole story, I think the leopards would agree that leaving the forest is probably the only option. If we don’t leave, many more animals will be lost to those ‘hunters.’” She paused then added gravely, “But I doubt the other forest animals will think the same way.”

Karenisha looked down. “I know. And it will take a lot to convince them. I don’t know where we could go or how we could to get the kingdom to follow us, but there is no other way we can survive.”

Maeta nodded grimly as she turned to her companion and asked, “What do you think, Loki?”

Loki’s wide green eyes flicked to Maeta’s face and then to Karenisha’s before she finally directed her gaze toward her paws and let out a long, slow sigh. “I think we’ll have to leave the forest and that the leopards will agree because they’ve noticed what’s been going on out there. Once they hear about these hunter things and...and what happened to Hateko... Once they know all that, they might want to leave, but the other forest animals have always thought this problem wasn’t a big deal, and unless they see what’s going on for themselves, they won’t see any reason to leave.”

Saderia blinked several times as a wave of horror made her heart beat faster. Slowly, she looked up at her mother, her amber eyes wide with pain and understanding. “We’ll have to let the forest be destroyed before we can make anybody leave,” she whispered.

Karenisha nodded, her face a grave mask of pain and sadness. “It’s the only thing we can do. We can’t force the other animals to leave and there’s no way we can leave all of them behind. The only way they’ll agree to leave is if they are so miserable they’re convinced it’s their only hope.”

Saderia swallowed hard, already able to picture the horrors she might have to witness in the future. She felt a prickle of fear and alarm when she wondered just how bad things would have to get before the others realized that leaving was their only choice. Her dark thoughts were broken when Maeta slowly stood up and announced that she needed to speak to the leopards to see who agreed with the idea and who didn't. Loki also leaped to her paws when Karenisha asked her to take Saderia back to the room so that she could go with Maeta.

"Sure, Queen Karenisha," Loki agreed as she darted over to Saderia to give her someone to lean on. After watching Maeta and Karenisha disappear behind the door to the room and pad reluctantly out of the house, the two slowly turned and began padding after them, letting the door click shut behind them. They paused just inches away from the archway that led to the bedroom when they heard the distinctive voices of Dash and Makero coming from inside.

"I shouldn't have let her go into those woods," Dash was saying.

Makero's gentler voice cut him off. "It's not your fault, Dash. When Saderia gets an idea in her head, there's no talking her out of it and I know you both just wanted to help. I'm actually glad you went with her so that she wasn't alone."

Dash bitterly muttered something that Saderia couldn't catch.

Makero's tone of voice was firmer. "Neither of you were hurt too badly. You have to let the past stay behind you and move forward. Saderia needs your help now more than ever with what's going on in the forest." Saderia knew he wasn't just talking about the experience in the woods and so did Dash.

"You can stop beating around the bush," he muttered sulkily. "We both know we're talking about Dastarius."

"Yes," Makero agreed, unfazed. "And you are nothing like your father. You can't let his memory destroy your life every time something bad happens. What you've done proves that you're a good animal and no matter what happens we'll always count you as a member of our family. Stop beating yourself up over this and move on. There will be much worse problems you'll have to face later on."

Dash sighed. "Sorry, Makero, but going there was a huge mistake and I should have stopped her. And I can't help thinking that letting her go

there was something Dastarius would have done...”

“It wasn’t, especially because you stayed with her.”

“I guess,” he sighed, adding with a warmer tone, “Thanks.”

“No problem. Now why don’t we go see how the others’ meeting is going?”

When Dash quietly agreed, Saderia let out a long sigh, knowing how Dash must feel. It was only then that she remembered that Loki was there. She let out a gasp of alarm as she whirled around to stare at her friend, realizing she had heard it all.

Catching Saderia’s troubled gaze, Loki smiled a kind and knowing smile. “One doesn’t hear what one doesn’t choose to hear,” she explained.

Giving her a grateful glance, Saderia looked up when Dash padded out of the room, his eyes trained sadly on his paws. He blinked in surprise when he looked up and saw them standing there. “Loki?” he asked in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard you guys went in the woods and I had to make sure you were okay. Saderia was just telling me about the hunter and how she got trapped by that tree,” she added with a sideways glance at Saderia. “It was good of you to stay with her. I know that if I had seen that hunter thing, I probably would have run for my life.”

“Thanks, Loki,” he muttered, managing a slight smile before pausing and adding, “Er, how long have you two been standing there?”

“We just got back from the meeting a second ago,” Loki replied obliviously. “Karenisha told us to come back here while she and Maeta hold a meeting with the rest of the leopards.”

“In that case, you three stay here while I go to the meeting, too,” Makero said as he appeared behind Dash. He briefly gave Saderia a sad smile before walking briskly toward the door that led outside where the sounds of the meeting floated over to them. As Makero threw open the door and darted out into the wide Home of the Leopards clearing, the three of them slowly turned and padded into the room.

Dash immediately pressed up against Saderia’s side to help support her as he and Loki carefully hoisted her up onto the bed. Letting out a long, relieved sigh, Saderia slowly leaned back, smiling gratefully at her two friends when they leapt onto the bed beside her. After turning slowly from Loki to Dash, she frowned when she noticed Dash’s troubled gaze.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Are you?” he replied with a worried glance.

“Yes. Don’t worry, I’m fine. My paw doesn’t hurt that bad except for when I put a lot of weight on it and you’ve helped me walk, so it’s perfectly fine. This whole thing is just a little overwhelming. I mean, I don’t even really know what to feel yet. We’re going to have to leave the forest. And I know it’s not going to happen right away, but still, the thought of it...”

“I don’t know what to think either,” Dash admitted, glancing at his paws. “I guess we’re in shock.” He sighed. “We never should have gone.”

“Maybe not, but at least we found out what was terrorizing the forest.”

“Yeah, but now we have to leave!” he protested. “This is just...I don’t even know what to think. I mean...where will we go? Will we ever see our home again?”

Saderia sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t know what to make of it either. I think we *have* to leave and I think the animals have to eventually see it that way, too, but I don’t *want* to leave and I can’t even *imagine* leaving. It’s almost as if I’m still hoping that *something* will stop us from leaving and save us and then we’ll be okay even though that’s probably not going to happen.”

Loki let out a long breath of air, her green eyes troubled as she stared at her paws. “I know the feeling,” she muttered.

Saderia looked down. “This whole thing is just so sudden. When I went to those woods, I never expected something like this would happen...”

“None of us did,” Loki growled, her spotted tail lashing back and forth in fury. “And if those ‘hunters’ weren’t armed, I’d sure give them a piece of my mind! They have no right to steal our forest!”

She gritted her teeth. “I agree! This is our home!”

While they calmed down, Dash quietly murmured, “If we can get the forest animals to leave, what kind of places do you think we’ll find? What could possibly be beyond this forest?”

“I didn’t even think there was anything beyond this forest until now,” Loki admitted.

“I feel the same way,” Saderia agreed. “But...hopefully there will be another forest like this one.”



“But what’ll we have to go through to get there?” Loki countered. “If we move to another forest that’s right next to ours, the hunters will just follow us there when they figure out we’ve moved. We’ll have to go somewhere where we can be sure they won’t ever find us.”

“Loki’s right,” Dash agreed miserably. “We’ll have to travel really far away in order to be safe. And who knows what we might have to face in order to do that!”

Saderia swallowed hard, her shock ebbing away as she realized what that meant. If they ever began their journey, animals would be lost or left behind and their forest would eventually disappear behind them, never to be seen again—not even from a distance. Maybe they wouldn’t be able to find another forest. Maybe they wouldn’t even make it past the trees.

Fear and sorrow stabbed her heart as she wondered how many animals would have to lose their lives in order to convince the forest to leave. How many would they lose on the journey? And how would they all be able to adjust to a new home if they ever found it?

“There’s got to be another way,” Loki said suddenly, desperately, revealing that her confidence had been more of a façade.

Saderia shook her head sadly. “There’s none that I can see. Mom said that once humans settle in the area, they don’t leave. Ever. And they can kill us from far away. We’ve got no chance at all. The only other thing we could do would be to hide forever, but what kind of life would that be?”

All of them let out a long, sorrowful sigh as they studied their paws, looking up only when they heard the clang of a door being opened and shut. They watched as Karenisha, Makero, Cia, Uncle Jash, and Maeta stepped somberly into the small room, their faces grim and upset.

“Isn’t there any other way?” Cia whispered to Karenisha.

The Queen shook her head. “I’ve already told you, Cia. We can’t fight the hunters or hide from them. Our only hope is to evacuate.”

“But to leave the forest...?” Uncle Jash exclaimed. “This can’t be the only way...”

While Karenisha padded closer to Saderia, Makero looked somberly back at them, his normally bright green eyes dulled with sadness. “There is no other way.”

Glancing up at Maeta and the others, Saderia tried to hide the fear in her gaze as she murmured, “What did the leopards decide?”

“About half of them wanted to stay in the forest while the other half wanted to leave,” Karenisha muttered, her amber eyes bleak and sad. “Even the leopards are undecided. This will be a very hard decision for the kingdom to make and they might not make the right one.”

Saderia’s ears drooped in sorrow and disappointment while Dash looked up at her royal parents. Karenisha and Makero avoided his gaze as they padded closer to them and slumped down beside the bed.

“We’ll be holding the meeting soon,” Karenisha murmured.

Saderia nodded as Makero glanced worriedly at her and Dash. “How are you two holding up?” he asked softly. “We know it’s a lot to deal with.”

Saderia and Dash glanced at each other for a long moment before pushing their fear aside and struggling to appear as undaunted and determined as they could. “We’re fine,” Saderia assured him, giving him a fake smile. “We’ll be okay.”

Despite her confident words, she found herself wondering if she would ever be okay when she had left her forest behind. Her eyes dulled and her smile slipped off of her face when she realized it would be almost like leaving a part of herself behind.

# Chapter Eight

## Enemies

When low growls and outraged howls sounded from outside the den, Dingo knew exactly what was going on. As he slowly pulled himself to his paws, feeling stiff and painful after the long sleepless night, he heaved a sigh of regret and resignation. Trying to ignore the pain in his sore paw pads, he crept over to the entrance of the rocky den and looked out. His ears drooped with sadness.

Just as he had guessed, two gaunt, dirty dingoes were racing through the camp, their eyes wild with desperation and terror at the knowledge that their life would soon be over. Dingo watched as a few members of the pack circled the camp to cut them off at the entrance while Bone and Rock raced after the two outcasts. He felt a stab of pity for the exiled dingoes, knowing how desperate and hungry they must have been to have broken into the pack's camp to try to steal food; taking food was a huge crime within the pack and a grave mistake. He wanted to help them, but there was nothing he could do; the pack members would just kill him too.

One of the outcasts stumbled and fell and Dingo looked away when one of the outcasts let out a pained howl. He slowly turned around once the howl cut off and felt a rush of cold when he saw the outcasts lying at the pack member's feet, their eyes wide and sightless and their fur stained with blood. Disgust rose in his throat when he saw the pack members step back to admire their kill, their eyes glittering with pride and triumph. He flinched when his light brown gaze fell on the outcasts and forced himself to turn away. Their lifeless stares burned in his mind as a dull, haunted feeling washed over him. For a moment, he couldn't help but see himself as one of those outcasts, lying dead at the pack member's feet with eyes that would never see again.

As the pack members stepped away from the bodies of the two dead outcasts, Dingo couldn't help but look at them in pity and sorrow, feeling sickened by the knowledge that their lives were seen as meaningless by the

pack. He sighed when he glanced back at the outcasts and realized just how bad their short lives must have been. Every rib was showing beneath their filthy fur, their bodies were lined with old scars that had never seemed to heal, and their rough, lacerated skin could be seen through clumps of missing fur. Dingo shuddered at how cruelly the pack treated the dingoes it exiled, the dingoes it didn't want anymore.

"Like looking into the future, huh, Dingo?"

Dingo jumped in alarm and whirled around to see Bone and Rock sitting just a few feet away from him, their eyes gleaming after watching the scene.

He didn't bother to reply to Bone and tried to avoid his brother's cold, amber gaze. Glancing back at the outcasts, he watched with dull, empty eyes as two pack members stepped forward and began dragging the outcasts' bodies out into the desert, all the while trying to ignore Bone's cold glare. He should have known the dark dingo wouldn't give up so easily.

Bone stalked over to him with a dark, taunting expression and growled, "I bet you think those worthless dingoes deserved to live, don't you?"

Dingo just stared at his paws, feeling saddened by his brother's obvious apathy that the life of another dingo had been taken. What if that attitude meant he had killed before or that he was at least capable of it?

Dingo still remembered the implications Bone had made in their fight, but it was still hard to believe he was a murderer. If a dingo killed another dingo within the pack, they were occasionally exiled. Dingo had always thought Bone valued his power in the pack too much to risk getting thrown out for killing a pack member, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe Bone had thought he would get away with it; if that was the case, then he had.

"Well, don't you *feel* sorry for those worthless outcast fleabags?" Bone insisted, dragging him out of his thoughts.

Dingo let out a long sigh as he glanced at Bone out of the corner of his eye. He wanted to ignore him, but he knew that Bone was getting frustrated with his lack of response. Dingo didn't feel like hearing any more taunts, so he kept his gaze trained on the ground and muttered, "Yeah. They didn't deserve to die and you know it." He narrowed his eyes in a sudden

surge of bitterness. “Outcasts don’t deserve to be hunted down like this. Some of them are as cold as the pack, but most of them know the truth: that the pack is evil and twisted. And that’s why they were exiled in the first place. They were exiled simply for having a different opinion.” He paused angrily before muttering, “You know that the only reason outcasts are even made is because the pack needs someone to torment besides each other. Because it lets sick, twisted dingoes like yourself keep all your precious power.”

Bone narrowed his eyes and lunged forward in one surprisingly fast moment to bring his paw down hard on one of Dingo’s legs. Dingo let out a loud yelp of pain when he heard a crack and staggered away from Bone, limping and looking up at his brother in shock, though silently cursing himself. He should have guessed Bone would have attacked him if he dared say something like that to the ‘glorious Second in Command.’

“Watch it, Dingo,” Bone growled. “Remember who you’re talking to.”

“I’m talking to my brother,” Dingo muttered hopelessly. He winced in pain when he tried to put some weight on the leg Bone had injured.

“I’d prefer not to be your brother,” Bone snarled, his amber eyes glinting with hatred and disgust. “I would think you wouldn’t be too fond of outcasts anymore, Dingo. After all, they did kill your sister.”

Dingo narrowed his eyes, trying not to flinch as he remembered how the pack had come to that confusing conclusion. When he didn’t reply, Bone paused then snickered, a slow, evil smile spreading across his face. “Or maybe you just blame yourself and not her actual killer, since it was your fault she died.”

Dingo winced and shivered, looking down as Bone let out a cold laugh. “It wasn’t my fault,” he whispered even though he knew it was.

“Of course it was,” Bone growled. “Don’t you remember?” He sneered at Dingo as his voice became mocking. “Claw wanted to go out in the desert all alone at night to plan to change the pack—her and her silly crusades!—and she asked her poor, idiot brother to come with her.” He grinned suddenly, his tone cold and triumphant. “But you turned her down. Remember? She went out all alone and she was killed. And you could have helped her, if only you were a better brother and had gone with her. Your cowardice killed her.”

Dingo shivered, remembering every detail from the horrible night that was forever etched in his memory. He had made a promise to Claw and himself long before her death, saying that he would protect Claw no matter what, but he had broken that promise and he had failed to keep her safe when he had refused to help her. When he had let her walk right into her own demise. Whatever had happened to her, he knew that he was to blame for all of it.

“Fine,” he muttered to Bone. “You’re right. My fault.”

“You killed your own sister,” he announced, a cruel grin spreading across his face.

Dingo winced and looked away, feeling almost faint as pain overwhelmed him. His paws itched to run away from there, but that was what Bone wanted. He wanted to lure him out of camp to kill him or to provoke Dingo into attacking him right there in camp so that Bone would have an excuse to murder him. The promise Dingo had made to his sister before she died was the only thing that kept him from doing either of those things and giving up. He had already broken one promise to Claw; he wasn’t about to break another.

Suddenly he realized that Bone was just trying to provoke him...or maybe cast the blame onto him. With a furious snarl, he forced his sadness to disappear as he whipped around to face Bone. “I might have let her go out alone, but I’m not the only one to blame,” he growled.

Bone shrugged. “The outcasts might have been the ones who actually killed her, but if you had gone with her you could have stopped it.”

“Maybe I could have. But I don’t think the outcasts are to blame...”

“That’s because you’re too *nice* and *forgiving*.”

“Not when it comes to the death of my sister,” Dingo snarled back, his tone low and almost dangerous-sounding. “You and I both know that Claw was a friend of outcasts. There’s no sense hiding it anymore; she’s dead.” Saying it out loud made him feel like he was being ripped apart, but he went on without flinching. “Friends don’t kill friends. I think someone else is to blame.”

Bone slowly narrowed his eyes. Their amber depths gleamed with warning and hatred as he snarled as lightly as possible, “Like who?”

Dingo wouldn’t have thought it possible, but this time he was able to match Bone’s cruel, threatening tone as he asked just as challengingly,

“Bone, where were you that night?”

Bone let out a sharp snarl that made several dingoes turn to look at them in surprise. “What are you accusing me of?” he demanded.

“You tell me,” Dingo retorted. “What did you mean when we were fighting?” *An annoying problem to get rid of. Just like your sister.* Bone’s cold threat echoed in his mind as he spoke and he felt a shiver of horror pass through him as he thought about it yet again.

Bone’s expression stayed cold and hateful and as the silence lengthened it became clear he was studying him, trying to figure out what he was thinking. Finally he sneered at Dingo. “If Claw did tell you all the incriminating things she knew, then it’s not too hard for you to figure out what I meant and what I did. And I think she did tell you.” The sneer faded and his voice was suddenly dangerous again. “I will find a way to eliminate you, Dingo. Watch your back.”

Without another word, he stalked away, leaving Dingo sitting there with eyes full of shock and misunderstanding. His tail drooped as he stared after Bone, confused and wishing he had never existed.

As the small, rocky dens cast dark shadows across the sandy ground, Dingo stepped painfully through the camp, trying not to wince when his injured paw sent fiery jolts of pain up his leg. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to walk on it because he knew better than to show weakness in camp. Sighing, Dingo ducked despondently into his den and peered through the darkness when he realized that his brother, Tear, was already inside, chewing on a bit of prey. Tear looked up in surprise when Dingo crept inside then let out an apathetic grunt.

“How’s your leg?”

“Fine,” Dingo replied as he flopped down onto the gritty floor of the den.

“What’d you do to get Bone so mad at you?”

Dingo rolled his eyes. “Breathe.”

Tear let out a little laugh before turning away from him and finishing his prey. A second later, Dingo’s other brother, Rip, padded inside. After a moment of talking, he and Tear walked out of the den to go do something, leaving Dingo alone with his thoughts. That was a place he really didn’t want to be.

Without meaning to, Dingo found himself wondering about Bone and what his past contained. As he thought about what might be hidden in Bone's eerie past, he began to remember their childhood and how it had been growing up together. Though a lot had changed, the one detail that stuck out from their shared pasts was that Bone and Claw had fought on a regular basis about the pack and about how Claw believed it should change. They had argued so often no one had even noticed after a while, but Dingo realized that in the last few weeks of her life, it had almost seemed like they were arguing in code about something Dingo could only guess at. He suddenly remembered Bone accusing him of 'knowing things,' things that Claw had somehow known and kept hidden. His heart skipped a beat. What had his sister gotten herself into and why was it haunting him now?

Drowning in his own jumbled, confused thoughts, Dingo longed to run to his secret den just to be away from the horrid camp and to try to get his thoughts together, but before he could move, he heard the pack Leader's voice slice through the hot desert air.

"Dingo!"

Dingo frowned, temporarily distracted as he wondered what Dagger wanted with him. He swallowed hard when he realized that he might want to exile him...but on what grounds? He hadn't done anything to cause him to be exiled so far unless Dagger and Bone had made something up. Hesitantly, Dingo stuck his head out of the den and narrowed his eyes when he saw Dagger and Bone sitting outside the Leader's den. To his relief, the rest of the pack didn't seem to be paying much attention to them, so Dingo guessed he wasn't being exiled. After glancing around one last time and letting out a resigned sigh, he slowly slunk toward them, keeping his head down to avoid their dark glares and trying hard not to imagine what they would want with him this time.

"Yes, Dagger?" he muttered as he padded up to the Leader, trying to ignore Bone's cold stare.

"I've told Bone to go check out the edge of the forest to see if he can find out what's causing those strange sounds, what's going on in there, and if it affects us. We can never be too careful."

Dingo raised an eyebrow. "And this concerns me, why?"

Dagger narrowed his yellow eyes at him and growled, "I want you to go with him."



Dingo blinked and opened his mouth to protest, but nothing came out. *What the...?* Bone was trying to *kill* him and Dagger was going out of his way to put them out in the desert, far away from camp, all alone... *This was a conspiracy!*

Dingo felt a stab of anger. Did *all* of his family want him to die? "Why?" he demanded. "Why do you want *me* to go?"

Dagger flicked his ears. "You're disposable."

"Great." So that was his excuse for sending him along; in case there really was something dangerous in the forest, send the different dingo who everyone wanted to get rid of anyway. "And what if I say no?"

Dagger curled his lip menacingly.

Bone glared at him. "That's an order, soon-to-be outcast."

Dingo narrowed his eyes, trying desperately to think of any way to get out of this. He knew that if he walked out of camp alone with Bone, he wouldn't be coming back. Looking for any excuse to save himself, he suddenly spotted Rip and Tear standing a few feet away, clearly eavesdropping on their conversation.

Trying to seem nonchalant, he turned to Dagger and suggested, "In case there is something in the forest, shouldn't we bring at least one more dingo?"

Dagger glared at him. "No, you're the only one who we can afford to get rid of."

"Really? If this is so dangerous and you're only sending dingoes you don't mind getting rid of, then why is your precious Second in Command coming, too?"

Dagger and Bone exchanged an aggravated glance.

"Two is enough," Bone snarled, not bothering to answer any questions. He narrowed his eyes menacingly. "Let's go."

"No, two's not enough. Look, if there's three of us then one of us can go in the forest to check it out and if anything happens, one can stay and fight and the other can run back to camp for help. It works out, doesn't it?" Dingo hated acting so stupid, but he had no choice but to play this annoying game. Glancing over at Rip and Tear, he called, "Hey, guys! Did you hear? We need an extra dingo! Want to come with us?"

They perked up instantly and within seconds, Rip had bounded over to them, his yellow eyes gleaming with excitement. "Sure, I'll come!" he

exclaimed, beaming at them with his usual sloppy grin.

Bone let out a low growl and turned to glare at his other brother.

“Rip, can’t you tell when you’re not wanted?”

Rip frowned. “I thought you needed an extra dingo.”

“Just because *Dingo* says...”

“Rip’s tough,” Dingo interrupted. “He’d be perfect for the job.”

“Rock’s tougher,” Bone disagreed, knowing that Rock, his favorite minion, wouldn’t care if he killed Dingo. He would probably help him hide the body.

“Rock’s already out hunting,” Rip said quickly; Dingo guessed he didn’t want to be upstaged by Rock *again* when he had a chance to show off to Bone.

Bone bitterly muttered something about Rock never being there when he was needed and then, with a outraged glare at Dingo, he snarled, “Fine, you can come, Rip.”

Dingo silently let out a long breath of relief, knowing that Bone wouldn’t dare try to kill him if Rip was around. Rip wouldn’t mind tormenting him or even attacking him, but he didn’t hate Dingo as much as Bone did and wouldn’t want him to be killed. He, at least, had enough loyalty that he would cause a disturbance if one of his brothers tried to kill another. Dingo spared a glance at his oldest brother and hid a grin when he read the anger in his eyes. If the furious look on Bone’s face was any indication, Dingo could tell he knew all that, too.

Dagger snorted as if he didn’t particularly care that much if Dingo lived or died and sent them away with a growl and a bored wave of his tail. As the three of them slunk off toward the camp entrance, Dingo could hear a low growl emanating from Bone’s throat. Rip, on the other hand, just seemed excited that he got to do something he seemed to classify an ‘important’ duty with Bone.

Once they had set out into the desert and left the camp a fair distance behind, Rip’s excitement calmed down just enough for him to realize that his traveling companions were a bit...less than chipper. Eventually he glanced over at Bone and raised his eyebrows. “What’s wrong with you?” he growled. “You look like you ran face-first into a cactus.”

Bone shot him a hostile glance and stormed ahead, muttering under his breath and leaving Dingo and Rip to trail behind him. Frowning, Rip turned discontentedly to Dingo. "What's up with him? I didn't do anything this time."

"He's mad at me, not you," Dingo explained, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. "You know how Bone gets when he doesn't get his way."

"What happened this time?"

"Just let me worry about that. Now come on or else we'll have to put up with him growling at us about being late."

"Good point." Rip rolled his eyes. "He's been as prickly as a cactus all year. Maybe he's bored now that Claw's not around to argue with him."

Dingo winced and looked away. "Yeah, that's it," he muttered to the ground.

Rip shot him an annoyed glance. "I'm just thinking out loud. It's your own fault if you feel like jumping in the Snake Pit every time someone says her name."

Dingo took in a deep breath then let out a long sigh. "I guess you're right. Sorry."

"Only *you* would ever 'apologize.'" Rip shook his head in disgust. "You do realize there's something seriously wrong with you, right?"

"I figured that out a long time ago, Rip."

"Well, good." He let out a little laugh. "You know, I still can't believe you, me, Bone, and Tear are related."

Glancing up ahead at Bone, who was still peeved that his plan to murder Dingo had failed, he muttered, "I couldn't agree more."

"That's the first intelligent thing you've said in twelve years," Rip commented.

Trying to keep his tone light, Dingo said, "Really? I'm still waiting to hear *you* say something intelligent."

Rip shoved him with a loud laugh. "Shut up, freak! You're the one who was born brainless."

"Would you two imbeciles come on and stop wasting my day?" Bone's irritated shout came from up ahead. "I've got better things to do than hang around with you losers, you know!"

Rip let out a low growl of only half-fake annoyance and ran ahead to catch up, calling, "You know, Bone, if you don't relax you're just going to explode...which could be kind of funny!"

"Shut up, Rip. I'm not in the mood for you," came Bone's aggravated reply.

Dingo ran forward to catch up with them, making sure to stay on Rip's other side, away from Bone, just in case the dark dingo stopped caring that Rip was there and attacked him anyway.

Rolling his eyes, though he was obviously a bit hurt, Rip growled, "Lately, you'd make a snake look good."

"Then why don't you go jump in the Snake Pit to hang out with them?" Bone retorted.

Rip raised an eyebrow. "Harsh, Bone."

"I don't care. Bother Dingo if you have to amuse yourself or go chase your tail or do something besides annoy me."

Rip bitterly narrowed his yellow eyes at his older brother before looking away from him with an annoyed snort. He turned to Dingo instead. "What's his problem?"

"I'm right here," Bone snapped. He was ignored.

Dingo just shrugged. "He's filled with murderous rage that he can't take out on anybody? How should I know?"

Rip shrugged and turned back to Bone. "So what exactly are we doing anyway?"

"I'll tell you when we get to the forest," Bone growled. "Now both of you shut up before I ram you into a cactus."

"Ouch," Rip said.

Bone turned to glare at him and Rip quickly shut up, glancing away from him and making an effort to keep quiet. As they walked on in silence, Rip tripped Dingo once to see if it would cheer Bone up; he got a little laugh out of it, but he still looked bitter. He kept casting murderous glances at Dingo, who tried his best to ignore them while at the same time trying to convince himself that he was the only one Bone had tried to kill. Still, he couldn't help but think about the deaths that had occurred before Claw had died and before Bone had become Second in Command.

The main memory that came to mind when he thought about that particular time period, besides his sister's death, was Fang's. Fang had been

Second in Command for years, long before Bone had taken over. He had been one of the most respected dingoes in the pack, but ever since Bone had taken his place, the pack had more or less forgotten Fang, probably the way Bone had wanted them to.

Fang's death had shocked the pack, especially since none of them had received any prior warning. Little more than a year ago, Fang had been found in the desert, bleeding from a fatal wound that led the pack to believe that an outcast had killed him, the same fate they later determined for Claw. That story had always seemed a bit sketchy, though. Fang had been one of the toughest dingoes in the pack and had harbored a healthy amount of paranoia that had always kept him on the alert. The idea that outcasts—who were usually too hungry and weak to even stand—had killed Fang had always seemed kind of suspicious. Now that he thought about it, he remembered with a dark feeling that Bone and Fang hadn't exactly gotten along since Bone had wanted Fang's position as Second in Command.

Feeling a tinge of sorrow and unease, he forced himself to stop thinking about death and conspiracies since he already knew it would do no good. They had almost reached the forest, anyway, and Dingo wanted to try to figure out if there really was something wrong in the forest, so he couldn't afford to be distracted.

He looked up in expectation and felt his breath catch when he saw leafy splashes of green appear above the yellow desert sand. As they drew closer, Dingo watched the forest unfold before him, his eyes trailing over the tall trees, the crouching bushes, and the bright green grass that slowly began to cover the warm sand. He stared out at the forest from the top of a sand dune in awe, his eyes piercing through the leafy branches of the trees even though he was unable to see into the darkness hiding in the woods.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly followed as Bone and Rip came to a halt right outside the strange green forest. After a few moments of peering through the trees, Rip looked up and asked, "So what are we going to do? Who's going to check it out?"

Bone cast a sideways glance at Dingo. "I think Dingo should go in. I'm sure there's nothing really dangerous in there anyway," he added, raising his eyebrows in a challenge.

Ignoring Bone's mocking gaze, Dingo sighed and muttered, "Fine, I'll check it out. But I'm not going far."

“Why, are you afraid?” Bone taunted. His tone was light because Rip was right beside him, but his amber eyes were dark.

Dingo stared at him for a long time before turning toward the forest, muttering, “There’s a lot more to be scared of out here than in there. And I don’t mean you, Bone, so don’t think you’re so tough.”

Bone, who had begun to look triumphant, scowled in annoyance and let out a low snarl. Dingo ignored it and padded toward the weird green grass that began to cover the sandy ground on the edge of the desert. As his paws touched the strange, soft grass, he glanced back at Rip and Bone, who were waiting for him on the slope of a small sand dune. Taking a deep breath, he turned around and padded deeper into the forest until he reached the puffy green bushes and trees. It all seemed strange to Dingo and he could only imagine what the animals that lived there looked like.

Leaving Bone and Rip and any fear behind, he padded farther into the forest, realizing this was the first time he had gone this far without running back in fear. Before, he had attempted to go into the forest with Claw, but they’d never gotten far. Now that the worst had already happened to him, he paced fearlessly into the bushes, wondering briefly if he could run away from the pack into the forest. Unfortunately, he had no idea what was waiting in the forest and he didn’t think he could ever leave the desert even if he hated it most of the time.

As he drove himself deeper into the forest, pushing his way past bushes and ignoring the odd creak of the trees above his head, he felt a strange, new urgency pushing him to keep walking. It wasn’t just the need to get away from the pack and Bone but something else that he couldn’t identify, something that worried him. Maybe the forest animals really were in danger...although he didn’t know why that should bother him so much even if he did care about most animals. After a moment, he decided that was all it could be.

“But look where that’s gotten me,” he muttered to himself. He had found a lot of trouble by *caring* about others and he was really getting sick of it. Still, he couldn’t staunch the feeling urging him to keep moving. Suddenly he paused then froze in shock when a horrible sound rang through the forest, loud and unlike anything he had ever heard. A loud **Crack!** followed by a screech of pain rang in his ears. His eyes opened wide with horror and his whole body went numb with fear.

In the split second it took for the awful sound to split the air, Dingo's first reaction was to search for the animal that had been hurt to see if he could help, but then the rational part of his mind kicked in and reminded him that whatever had made that scream must be dead. Without another thought, he whipped around and raced out of the forest as fast as he could, realizing that something horrible really had been threatening the forest.

Terrified, he burst out of the trees and raced toward his brothers, his quarrel with Bone temporarily forgotten.

"What was that?" Rip exclaimed, already on his feet and looking around in alarm.

Even Bone looked a little shaken. "What *was* that?" he echoed, turning to glare at Dingo. He narrowed his eyes. "Well, loser? What was in there?"

Forgetting to glare back, Dingo just shook his head, panting. "I have no idea, but I've never heard anything like that before. I got out of there as fast as I could."

"Smart move," Rip commented with wide eyes as he looked fearfully at the forest.

Bone just gave him a hostile glare. "Idiot," he snarled. "You were supposed to figure out what was in there!"

"Well, sorry for having a little instinct called *self-preservation*!" Dingo shouted.

Bone narrowed his eyes and looked about to say something, but Dingo turned his back on him and stalked over to Rip. "Are we going back to camp or not?" he growled. "You're not getting me back in there and I don't suppose either of you are brave enough to go in yourselves."

Both of them glared at him, but as their anger faded, Dingo heard Rip growl, "Whatever it is, it sounds like it's having a great time with the forest food, so it won't bother us. We should go."

Nice excuse, Dingo thought bitterly as he stalked back in the direction of camp. He felt slightly relieved when Rip followed him so that he wouldn't have to put up with Bone trying to kill him again. Bone paused, glared, then followed, taking the lead so that his authority was not forgotten. Dingo ignored him as he stormed ahead, trying to make himself forget the sound and the screech of the animal in pain.

He let out a scared, angry growl when he realized that now he had another thing to worry about besides the increasingly evil pack, Bone and his murder plots, and his past: the thing terrorizing the forest. Rip was probably right when he predicted it would stay in the forest, but he still couldn't ignore the feeling in the back of his mind urging him to go back and do something. Pushing the thought away as best as he could, he let out a low growl and padded onward.

Thinking about the sound he had heard, he knew it wasn't as terrifying to him as it probably should have been. Even though the sound had startled him, he no longer felt afraid. He didn't think he could fear anything after growing up in the pack and hearing the dying screams of outcasts and pack members and the murderous howls of the pack as they claimed their victims. He didn't think anything could truly horrify him after he had been the one to find his sister lying lifeless in the desert sand, bleeding from a raw, vicious wound in her throat. To him, nothing could ever shake him more deeply than Claw's death.



# Chapter Nine

## Forest-Wide Alert

A soft, collective murmur of voices brushed against Saderia's ears as she stared numbly out at the forest around her, her amber eyes dull and lifeless. Her tail twitched at the touch of a falling leaf and her ears pricked up at a sudden rustle of a nearby bush. With a soft sigh, she turned her gaze to the forest animals spread out beneath her in an attempt to stop the paranoid prickling of her fur. A bad mistake. The instant her gaze fell onto the scared, murmuring crowd, her eyes immediately met with the terrified green irises of another animal. Flinching, she tore her gaze away and studied her paws, trying to push the image of Hateko's wide green eyes out of her mind and feeling her fur bristle with distress.

A soft brown paw brushed hers and she cut her eyes to the side. She managed a weak smile at her best friend before averting her gaze, feeling hollow. Dash pressed closer to her and when she spared another glance back at him, she saw the same dullness in her amber eyes reflected in his. It was as if he never blinked as he stared out at the crowd. It was as if no one was there and the only thing he could see were the same things she could: Hateko's eyes, his collapse on the ground, the coming destruction of the forest...and their journey to leave it behind.

Suppressing a shudder, Saderia slowly looked up and gazed out at the crowd, trying to find hope in the fact that every animal in the forest had gathered for a meeting and that they now knew about the hunters. Hopefully that knowledge would help them protect themselves. Unfortunately, as she gazed out at the enormous clearing and the large group of animals squeezed into it, she was able to read the disbelief in the animals' eyes. In addition to the shock, confusion, and raw terror etched in every line of almost every animals' face, she could also detect the denial, as if they could hardly believe it was true. With a shiver, she remembered the looks on their faces when Karenisha and Makero had described the hunters and their decision to leave just a few minutes ago. The forest animals' initial surprise had sliced

through her heart and after that, the only thing she could do was watch as their shock turned slowly to befuddlement, then horror, terror, desperation... When her parents had finally finished speaking, all eyes of every animal were on them, their deep depths wide with terror and desperation as they silently begged for help.

*Hateko.* Saderia winced and shoved the memory out of her head even as she let out a defeated sigh. She knew she would never forget the terrified look he'd given her.

"They're never going to agree to leave." Saderia glanced up at the sound of Dash's voice. Her dark brown friend lashed his tail rapidly back and forth across the grass as he stared out at the animals gathered around the meeting place. "This is hopeless."

Saderia looked down and didn't reply. Her tail twitched lightly across the grassy ground when she felt the presence of her royal parents behind her, but she didn't bother to look up to see them standing behind her near the trunks of two ancient oak trees. To see the fear in the gazes of the animals below her and the dismay in the eyes of her best friend was difficult. To read the defeat in the expressions of her own parents or to watch them put on a shaky façade might be unbearable.

As the murmuring of the animals below her grew louder, she cut her eyes to the side when she saw a movement. She winced when she saw Cia and Uncle Jash standing just a few feet away on the edge of the forest, just barely inside the clearing of the meeting place. Their faces were pale with horror and their eyes stretched wide with fear as they stared out at the panicking forest animals. They looked up and glanced at her parents, Dash, and herself with eyes full of confusion and desperation.

Turning, she forced herself to stare at the tall, dense trees surrounding the meeting place to distract herself before returning her gaze to the ground when the woods encircling the clearing began to remind her too much of a trap. Studying the sprigs of grass between her paws, she was forced to look up only when the loud voice of one animal jolted through her thoughts and echoed around the clearing.

"We can't leave the forest!" someone shouted. "It's our home! It's *been* our home for centuries! How can you ask us to leave?!"

Saderia looked up in dismay, trying and failing to hide the sorrow and despair in her wide amber gaze as she heard her own thoughts reflected

in the words of the animal. Her gaze swung rapidly around when another animal yelled, "He's right! We can't just leave! Where would we go? How would we get there?"

"We'll all die if we leave!" another shouted.

Saderia felt a shudder race down her spine even as someone else snapped, "We'll all die if we stay!"

Feeling her fur prickle when she recognized the voice of Loki, Saderia glanced up when she heard someone else argue, "But this is our home! We know it way better than those *creatures!*"

Other animals shouted their agreement. Saderia's fur began to bristle and her eyes slowly started to narrow. Couldn't they understand how awful those creatures were?

"It doesn't matter," echoed Maeta's stern voice. "Whether we know the terrain better or not, those things will still be able to hunt us down and kill us at a distance. We've got no chance."

"You're all cowards!" hissed another animal, making the fur on Saderia's back begin to bristle. "We can't just let those things drive us out! This is *our* home!"

"It will no longer be our home if we have to hide from those things!" Saderia snapped back, surprising herself as she leaped to her paws and stared out at the crowd of forest animals. Almost instantly, the murmuring grew quieter as they turned to face her, their eyes wide as if pleading for guidance or narrowed as though skeptical of anything she had to say.

Narrowing her eyes, Saderia hissed, "Do you think I *want* to leave this forest? When I've grown up here my entire life? When this forest is the only place I've known? Where I have ancestors that grew up in this forest century after century? Of course I don't! But I also don't want to die. If we stay here, we're doomed. Those things will be all over the forest in just a few week's time. After that, we'll never be able to leave our houses to get food, to get water, to meet friends, to play, to do anything! Our friends will fade out of our lives. Our family members will become distant with fear. Our cubs will be too afraid of going outside to even see what the forest looks like! We may have lived here for centuries, but things change."

"Why do we have to change for those creatures?" someone demanded.

“We’re not changing for them,” Saderia replied darkly. “We’re changing for us. We’re changing for the safety of ourselves and our future, for our families and friends, our parents and our children. None of you have seen what those things can do to an animal. To endure such an awful demise or even to witness it is a fate I wouldn’t wish on anybody. And unless we all start to see reason and leave to save ourselves, that fate could very well befall everyone I’m looking at right now. To choose to stay here is to choose to die. We must leave!”

“If we don’t get out of this forest, we’ll be living in fear until the hunters find us,” Dash exclaimed as he jumped to his paws beside Saderia. “If we stay, the whole forest will be wiped out and everything and everyone will be destroyed! If we find somewhere else to live, we’ll be able to survive and keep our old ways. We *have* to leave so that we’ll be able to survive, so that we’ll be able to triumph over these hunters!”

“Easy for you to say!” snarled an angry voice. “I bet you *want* to leave *your* family legacy behind, but the rest of us don’t!”

Dash stiffened and narrowed his eyes while another animal shouted, “Sure, go ahead and act like the hero, Dash! You probably want your so-called ‘sister’ to be killed so that someday you’ll rule the forest!”

“That’s enough!” Makero shouted.

“How *dare* you?!” Saderia echoed as she leapt to her paws and let out a fierce hiss, ready to confront anyone who said anything so cold to her best friend.

Karenisha leapt forward to stand beside Saderia, her orange and black-striped fur bristling as she pressed closer to her daughter. “Everybody stop!” she snapped. “You’re becoming a mob!” Dropping her voice to a low growl as the voices quieted down, she hissed, “If we all don’t calm down, we’ll destroy ourselves before the hunters even have a chance!”

“Karenisha’s right!” Makero shouted as he leapt forward to stand beside Dash. “We all have to be calm. We understand that this is sudden and we understand that this is scary. We know that all of you must be confused, but you must try to understand our perspective on why we must leave. All of you need to think about it and make a decision.” Taking a deep breath, he tiredly announced, “Those who want to stay, group together on the left, and those who want to leave, go to the right. Think carefully before deciding as it affects the whole forest. We won’t leave anyone behind.”

The crowd fell silent and stared at their paws. Their eyes clouded with fear and desperation as they struggled to decide what was best. Saderia watched them darkly, flicking her tail and waiting for their decision.

“Saderia, calm down,” Karenisha hissed. “Sit down and stop glaring and lashing your tail at them.”

Saderia flashed her an indignant glance before slowly lowering herself to the ground and curling her fluffy tail over her paws as calmly as she could. Dash was already sitting with his gaze trained on the cracked, dirty ground below, avoiding the stares of the crowd. After a moment’s hesitation, Saderia slowly slipped closer to him and laid her paw comfortingly over his. He let out a long sigh as he looked up at her, managing to give her a weak, grateful smile before his gaze returned to the ground and his eyes clouded with sadness and worry.

Letting out a soft sigh of her own, Saderia looked up and faced the crowd with dull, defeated amber eyes. She watched as they slowly began to move to different sides. She hung her head once more, trying to stifle a rush of fear and despair when she realized that already there were a lot more animals on the stay side than the leave side.

As more animals gathered to the stay side, she glanced half-heartedly at her friend and frowned when she noticed the sudden hope in his amber gaze as he scanned the crowd. After a long moment of hesitation, Saderia whispered, “Who are you looking for?”

Dash jumped at the sound of her voice and whirled around to face her, seeming alarmed. After a moment, he let out a sigh and his head drooped. “It doesn’t matter; I didn’t think she would be here anyway. But I...I just can’t help wondering what she’ll do if the hunters do come or if we do decide to leave...I mean, what if the hunters get her?” When he looked up at her, his amber eyes were filled with grief and guilt. Saderia blinked, wondering what he was talking about. Who was *she*?

With a flash of insight and a rush of sorrow and sympathy, it took her only a second to realize that he must mean Lolista; she was his mother, after all, and she knew that he must still care about her even after what happened. She wrapped her tail tightly around his and gave him a sympathetic smile. “Don’t worry about Lolista,” she whispered as convincingly as possible. “She has her ways.”

Dash’s eyes flashed with alarm at the mention of her name. “I...”

“It’s okay,” Saderia interrupted quietly. “If she was my mother, I’d worry, too, no matter what happened.”

Dash blinked and looked down with a sad sigh. Saderia could only imagine how afraid he must be for his mother even if they had never really known each other; family was family, no matter what.

Saderia knew that Lolista wouldn’t dare show her face around the King and Queen after what she had done to Saderia, so she would have no warning about the hunters. If the forest eventually did decide to leave, she wouldn’t be with them. Glancing around the clearing where the meeting had taken place, she searched the trees and bushes around it for cold ice blue eyes, but saw nothing.

Pushing it out of her mind, she turned to look up at the group of animals and watched with a sinking feeling as the last few animals moved to the left. Swallowing hard, she realized that there were hundreds of animals on the stay side and only a few on the leave side. Letting out a sad sigh, she slowly lowered her gaze again and stared at the ground as a dull sense of sorrow and resignation burned in her chest. Her ears pricked up when she heard her parents let out low sighs as they too realized what the kingdom had decided.

“The decision has been made,” Makero announced, his green eyes dark with disappointment. “We will stay—for now. But I’m sure that in time you will all see that leaving is our only choice.” The animals shifted nervously with unease and uncertainty as Makero flicked his tail to draw the meeting to a close. “This meeting is over, but I suggest you all take drastic measures to protect yourselves from the hunters. Until we call for another meeting, be safe.”

With an agitated flick of his tail, Makero turned around to lead his family back toward their homes while behind him the forest animals broke into anxious murmurs. Saderia cast one last uneasy glance back at the forest animals as they started to melt back into the woods before turning to trot rapidly after her father. Dash quickly followed her. They looked down as they fell into step beside Karenisha and Makero to avoid seeing their dark, stoic expressions. Saderia glanced up only when they drew closer to the woods and Cia and Uncle Jash stepped forward to greet them.

“I don’t know why you think we have to do something as drastic as leave the forest, Sis,” Cia murmured as she fell into step beside her twin

and began following her back to their home. "I've never seen one of those hunters, but they can't be that bad."

Karenisha narrowed her eyes. "You *haven't* seen one, Cia, so it's not for you to say. Besides, I'm sure you'll change your mind about that once they come closer. Just do us a favor and be careful."

"The forest has managed to survive for thousands of years," Uncle Jash spoke up. "We'll probably be able to overcome this."

Makero's green eyes flashed as he stared unblinkingly at the wild, shady path ahead. All he said was, "We'll see."

Bright stars glittered down from a silent black sky, illuminating the empty, barren land below. Low growls filled the hot air as howls broke the silence of the night. Saderia's eyes flew open and she peered off into the murky distance. She let out a gasp when she made out two dark, blurry figures standing just a few paces away. Her paws brushed against the hard, gritty ground as she crept forward, her eyes wide with wonder. Slowly the creepy growls grew louder and louder. Her heart skipped a beat when a raw snarl tore out of the throat of the lankier figure on the left.

"Enough games!" he shouted, his voice echoing around the barren landscape. His light brown eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Just tell me what you did to Claw!"

A gruff, warning growl erupted from the broader figure on the right. "I don't have to tell you anything," he snarled, his deep voice just barely above a whisper. "Stay out of my business!" His amber eyes flashed and his tail lashed furiously back and forth as he crept toward the lighter-voiced figure on the left. Shivers traveled up Saderia's spine when she heard a low, dangerous growl.

"Stay away from me!" the brown-eyed figure snarled.

The larger figure just laughed. "Prepare to die! Just like your sister!"

A snarl like a thunderclap tore out of the skinnier figure as he stalked forward, his tail lashing with rage. "You killed her!" he howled. "Didn't you?!"

The darker-voiced figure let out a cold growl. "You don't know anything." With a low, furious snarl, he lunged toward the brown-eyed figure before he had time to respond.

Saderia's mouth gaped open in horror as the thinner figure collapsed to the ground and let out a loud howl, his paws scraping fiercely against his attacker's chest. She let out a gasp when the darker figure shoved the other against the dirt, a low snarl filling the thick air around them. She took a step forward then froze. Her eyes widened in horror as the darker figure looked up at her, a wide yellow sneer spreading across its shadowed, expressionless face.

"I'll make you pay." The cold words whispered across her ears as amber eyes flashed in the distance and a savage howl split the air.

Stumbling back, she let out a shriek of terror as the black sky seemed to swallow the light earth whole. Her eyes darted wildly back and forth, searching for a way out of the blackness as cruel, threatening growls seemed to echo from every direction. Fear raised every hair on her back and she frantically whirled around, searching desperately for a way out. She let out a cry when the growls grew louder and pricked her ears when she heard a sharp howl erupt from the shadows. As the snarls grew louder, she had to strain her ears to hear a tiny whisper.

"Don't worry," a voice whispered. "I'll help you." The growling grew louder as Saderia struggled to hear the last words. "I'll make sure you're safe."

A shriek tore out of her mouth as the darkness closed in on her, shoving her to the ground and forcing her to squeeze her eyes shut as a raw, earsplitting *Crack!* burst through the dark.

The entire room seemed to tremble as Saderia's eyes sprung open. Her entire body jerked forward without her even realizing it. Her head whipped around to stare at the shuddering window as her eyes opened wide with fear and confusion. A sharp slam from behind her shook the house, forcing her to whirl around with eyes full of terror and alarm as Dash burst into her room.

His eyes met hers. "Did you hear that?" he exclaimed. "It's the hunters!"

Saderia's eyes widened with horror as she leapt off of her bed, her tail lashing fearfully back and forth. "It is?! What...what's going on?!"

"Didn't you hear that shot?" Dash replied. "It sounded like it came from just a few miles away!"



“What?” Saderia gasped.

Dash opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word, another loud slam jolted them from behind. Whirling around, they found themselves staring into the troubled amber and green eyes of Karenisha and Makero as the door swung open and the two raced into the room. Saderia studied her parent’s shadowed faces and felt a tinge of worry shiver up her spine when she saw Cia and Uncle Jash rush in behind them, carrying boards, nails, and hammers.

“It’s okay,” Makero soothed them as he stopped beside them, giving them a tight smile. “It didn’t sound like anyone was hurt and the shot was very far away. You don’t have to worry.” Even as he spoke, however, Saderia couldn’t help but feel a shiver of apprehension. She let her gaze wander past him to Karenisha, Cia, and Uncle Jash and frowned when she realized the three tigers had crept closer to the window at the back of her room.

“What are those boards for?” she stammered.

Her mother spared a glance back at her before turning away. “The windows,” she murmured as she stared out at the anxious world outside. “It’s already starting, Saderia. The hunters are getting closer. We’re hoping that if we board up all the windows, they might provide a bit more protection if the hunters get any closer.” She paused then turned to stare at her children, her amber eyes narrowed and serious. “After we do that, neither of you are to leave the house unless you’re with us or there’s an emergency. You can’t risk going out there and being seen by those *things*. Do you understand?”

Saderia nodded meekly, her eyes wide with unease. “Of course, Mom. We...we won’t go anywhere.”

“Good,” she growled. Her eyes narrowed as she turned tersely back to the window. She glanced quickly at Cia and Uncle Jash and then flicked her tail toward the glass. “Come on, let’s get this sealed off so we can do the same for the rest of the house.”

Cia and Uncle Jash exchanged a fearful glance before reluctantly stepping forward to cover the window with boards. As Saderia sat back and watched, she felt suddenly hollow and her eyes grew distant. She barely felt the soft touch of her father’s paw when he rested it comfortably over her own as she stared at the window and at the serene forest outside. The sound

of the hammer rang in her ears as she watched the last patch of glass be covered, blocking her view of her forest home and throwing the room into a bleak darkness.

After she had finished her work, Karenisha stepped silently away from the window, gave her daughter a brief nod, and trotted resolutely out of the room, flicking her tail for Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash to follow. Makero nuzzled her gently before turning and padding out of the room behind Cia and Uncle Jash. As the door shut behind them with a soft click, Saderia merely stared after them, her eyes dull and lifeless. Slowly she turned and held Dash's scared amber gaze before sadly looking away.

"I had a Dream last night," she murmured, trying to distract herself from the boarded window and the small lines of light she could see streaming through the wood.

Dash's ears pricked up almost instantly. "You did? What about?"

Saderia frowned. "I was in this bleak...horrible place and I saw these dark figures." Blinking rapidly, she quickly began to describe the Dream. When she finished, she turned to see Dash staring at her in alarm, his amber eyes narrowed with confusion.

"Dark...figures?" he asked quietly. "Who were they?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "I didn't hear names. I didn't even see what kind of animals they were."

"Why would you see them in your Dream at all?" Dash demanded. "What do they have to do with what's going on in the forest right now?"

"I don't know." Saderia frowned as her Dream whisked through her mind. "Who's Claw?"

Dash blinked. "What? Claw?"

"The name from my Dream," Saderia murmured. "I think I heard it in my other Dream, too; I just didn't really pay attention to it."

"Is it something from the future?" Dash guessed.

"Or the past," Saderia replied softly. She narrowed her eyes as a dull flash of sorrow tickled her paws. "Whoever it is, they're dead," she murmured, thinking of the fight she had witnessed. "And someone killed her, I think. But what this has to do with us, I don't know."

"It's a her?"

"I think so." She sighed. "It doesn't matter now. It doesn't have anything to do with us right now, anyway, at least as far as I can see. We

should focus on other things right now, like helping Mom and Dad. I'm sure this is really hard for them."

Dash paused then nodded sadly. "Yeah, I guess it is. Should we go help them with the rest of the windows?"

Saderia let out a long sigh. "We might as well." She turned her gaze to the window once more as she slowly pushed herself to her paws and turned toward the door. "Come on," she muttered, flicking her tail to signal for Dash to follow her. "We've got a lot of windows to cover."

"Right." He followed hastily after her as she shoved open the door and padded down the wide, ornate hallway.

Saderia crept to the edge of the hallway and looked out into the front room where she immediately spotted her parents. Karenisha and Makero looked up as Saderia and Dash padded over to them, their eyes flicking to the partially covered window just beside the door. Trying to hide her sorrow and reluctance, Saderia managed to give them a weak smile.

"Need some help?" she asked.

Her parents smiled back at her. "Yes, that would be great," Karenisha replied as she stepped aside, revealing a stack of boards. "Why don't you two finish up this one? Your father and I will start on the living room."

"Okay."

Her parents gave her a gentle flick of their tails and began padding toward the archway that led to the dining room and living room.

After watching them leave, Saderia slowly turned back to the window and picked up a board, trying to ignore the image of the peaceful woods outside. As she worked to cover the windows beside Dash, her mind strayed to her strange Dream. She didn't know why, but she felt a strong pull towards the shape with the lighter, gentler voice. Something about it—him—made pity knot in her chest as she thought about what it had been saying.

When it had spoken that strange name—'Claw'—she could practically feel the pain emanating from his words; it was obvious how much he must care for her, whoever she was. She had sensed the regret and hatred in his voice when he talked to the gruffer-voiced shape, as well. She didn't completely understand it, but she burned with the desire to find out why the lighter-voiced shape felt that way and if she could possibly help

him. The instinct to help was almost overwhelming, forcing her to freeze with surprise and confusion before returning to working on the windows.

As the powerful instinct slowly faded away, Saderia felt a tingle of shock when she realized that she had only felt something similar once before: when she had wanted to help Dash. It wasn't as strong, but it was still persuasive. Maybe she would find out more about this animal and her longing to help in the future.

Once again feeling daunted almost to the point of lightheadedness, Saderia shook herself and reminded herself that she had something much more important to do before she tried to figure out who this new animal was and why he needed her help. First, she had to save the forest. Just as she thought it, she heard a raucous gunshot somewhere in the distance and her eyes narrowed with sorrow as she nailed on the final piece to cover her last glimpse of her peaceful forest.

# Chapter Ten

## Forever Fighting

As the sun inched upward into the sky, Dingo found himself padding gingerly toward the entrance of his den, hoping to find something to do and wanting to be alone. Ignoring the glares and taunts of the pack members, he stepped carefully out into the desert and began walking aimlessly in whatever direction seemed best. With a sigh, he made his way through the sand dunes and soon found his mind wandering to what he had heard in the forest and, of course, to what Bone might have done.

Shaking his head almost violently, Dingo continued moving more forcefully than before, determined to keep those thoughts out of his head and enjoy his solitude. Unfortunately, his alone time away from the pack was cut short when he looked ahead and spotted a few familiar figures standing at the top of a nearby sand dune. Dingo was able to make out the reddish, skinny shape of Rip, the orange, huskier figure of Tear and the brown forms of a few other dingoes as they raced toward him, their tails waving widely back and forth.

“Hey!” one of them shouted when they caught sight of him. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m allowed to walk in the desert if I want,” Dingo growled.

“Well, we don’t want you here,” another dog snapped with a hostile glance.

Dingo sighed, wondering why they were acting so bitter toward him. Was Bone going around telling them something about him or was he just paranoid? He turned around to walk away then paused when Rip spoke up.

“All right,” Rip said enthusiastically, speaking to the other dingoes. “This seems like a good place to practice and prepare for the Hunt!”

Dingo frowned and turned around to face them in confusion. “We hunt all the time—what’s to prepare for?”

Rip glanced at him and rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking about the normal prey, moron," he snapped, his eyes narrowed with hostility. "I'm talking about the forest food."

Dingo blinked. "The forest food?"

"It's no surprise *he* doesn't know about it," one of the other dingoes growled reproachfully. "He's the least important dingo in the pack."

"Exactly. But if he doesn't do a good job in the Hunt, he could be exiled," Rip told them more cheerfully.

Dingo flattened his ears. "Great, I might be exiled," he muttered sarcastically. "Could you all cut the dramatics and just tell me what you're talking about?"

Rip rolled his eyes irritably, looking annoyed at having to explain something obvious to his weird brother. "The forest food! You know how weird things are going on in the forest? Well, the animals that live there—the forest food—might start coming this way any day now to get away from those weird sounds. We're all preparing to hunt them down. They're a bit tougher and bigger than what we normally hunt, though, so we're all warming up for it. It's a celebration type thing, but I suppose you'll ruin it all by saying we shouldn't hunt them." He rolled his eyes. "Freak."

Dingo's eyes widened in alarm. "You're planning to hunt the forest food?"

"See—there he goes," Tear muttered with a roll of his eyes.

"Yeah, do you mind?" a dingo growled. "Could you take your stupid *different* dingo speech somewhere else and stop ruining it for the rest of us?"

"Yeah, you're like a storm cloud," another agreed.

"Get lost," the last one put in with a hostile glare. "The pack should have thrown you out a long time ago, freak. I suppose you don't want to kill the forest food like the rest of us do."

"No, I don't! They're like us!" Dingo protested. "At least, I think they are. They have a way of life, too!"

"And part of life is dying," Rip growled flatly. "Get it through your head, Dingo."

Tear glared at him, too. "I would have thought you would have figured that out by now."

Dingo winced as Rip suddenly smirked at him. "Yeah, Dingo. Claw died, and everybody except you has moved on. Who's going to shed a tear if a few forest food animals die?"

Narrowing his eyes, Dingo growled through gritted teeth, "The only reason you psychopaths are so quick to move on when Claw or any other dingo dies is because you're sick! You think it's a weakness, but that's not true!" Lashing his tail back and forth, he growled, "But why should you care? Considering you kill your own kind for sport, I guess you shouldn't mind if a few forest animals are killed."

All five dingoes let out furious snarls and gave him hostile glares; Rip looked like he wanted to attack him, but before he could, something heavy pushed Dingo to the ground, forcing a yelp of alarm out of his throat. Dark paws pinned his legs to the ground and held him down so that he couldn't move. A low voice snarled in his ear. "Careful what you say, Dingo. One wrong word could get you living as an outcast, or better, *dead*."

"Back off, Bone!" Dingo howled, struggling fiercely against the weight of the Second in Command.

Ignoring him and letting out a low, mocking chuckle, Bone snarled, "I bet you'll want to protect the worthless forest food from us, won't you, Dingo? Well, go ahead and we'll exile you for ruining our meal. I doubt you'll be able to stop us from killing them anyway, considering how 'good' you are at protecting someone. Just look how well 'protecting' Claw worked out." Tears pricked his eyes as Bone went on, speaking lowly so that only Dingo could hear him. "Go ahead and get attached to the forest food like you did with Claw. That way, when I kill them, you'll be destroyed *again*. That'll make getting rid of you so much easier."

Dingo let out a yelp as Bone dug his claws into his shoulders and smacked him across the forehead. "Pathetic," he snarled with a cold laugh as he let Dingo stumble to his paws and stand, surrounded by the others who were now laughing at him.

"Yeah, I wouldn't advise trying to protect the forest food," Rip spoke up from where he sat. "You'll be exiled. The rest of us will be happy, but I don't think you will."

"Yes, but it's about time we threw him out of camp," Bone growled. "Dingo, you've been nothing but an annoyance since you were born, even more so since Claw died. We shouldn't have to support you."

“Yeah, throw him out!” another dingo agreed. “We don’t need weaklings like him in the pack! He just makes the rest of us look weak!”

“Just because I actually care about others doesn’t make me weak!” Dingo snapped bitterly.

“Yeah, right,” one of them growled.

“Yeah, have you seen your reflection lately?” another agreed. “You’re a wreck.”

“You *cared* about Claw, but when she died, you wanted to die,” Rip growled scathingly. “And that’s not a weakness?”

“We should have fulfilled your death wish back then,” Bone snarled. “That way we wouldn’t have to deal with you now.”

“Why didn’t you just kill me then?” Dingo countered.

Bone said nothing and just narrowed his eyes with a menacing glare.

“We should keep him away from the Hunt when the forest food get here,” Tear spoke up with a hostile glance at Dingo.

“Yeah, we could keep him in the Snake Pit,” Rip suggested with a laugh that made him sound like a hyena.

Bone chuckled along with him, but his eyes were cold; Dingo knew that, unlike Rip, he probably wasn’t joking about throwing him in the Snake Pit. “Poor, worthless Dingo,” he growled condescendingly when he caught him staring at him. “I would hate to be you. I mean, you don’t even have a name since you don’t deserve one.”

“I have a name,” Dingo snapped, digging his claws deep into the sand.

“Not much of one. But then, you’re not much of a dingo.” Bone let out a cruel laugh that was more of a snarl.

“Look, Bone...”

“You look, Dingo,” Bone interrupted. “We don’t like you here. The whole pack wants you dead. Why don’t you do us all a favor and just die already?”

“Because I promised Claw I wouldn’t give up,” Dingo growled in a low voice so that only Bone could hear him.

“*I promised Claw,*” Bone mocked him with a sneer. “You’re going to fail and die anyway so what’s a stupid promise matter?” Dingo was silent as Bone went on, “See what I mean about your weaknesses? Anyone in your place would have given up a long time ago, but because of some



worthless promise you made to your dead sister, you keep getting pushed around and attacked. Don't you realize how wrong you are about *everything*? How do you live with yourself?"

"How do *you* live with yourself?" Dingo retorted, thinking once again of what might have happened in Bone's past.

Bone narrowed his eyes, but otherwise ignored him and changed the subject. "You do realize Claw thought you were just as worthless as the rest of us do, right?"

Dingo blinked, taking a step back. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Bone snorted. "Claw had to take care of you from day one. Don't you think that got a little old after a while? You never helped her with anything; it was always *her* saving *you*! And you never did repay her, but you think if you keep this one stupid promise to her to 'not give up,' it'll all be okay." He let out a humorless laugh. "Claw thought you were the biggest annoyance in the desert. You dragged her down and you know it. If it weren't for you holding her back all the time, she probably would have changed the pack and became Leader a long time ago. Not to mention, she would still be alive."

Dingo flinched. "That's not true!"

"Isn't it? Think back. What did you do for her? What did she do for you? If she hadn't been too busy looking out for you and worrying about you all the time, she could have done things. But you were so pathetic you couldn't do anything yourself, always needing her help. No matter who killed Claw, you know you're partly to blame."

Dingo glared at him for a long time and then looked at the ground, not noticing how Bone had randomly changed the subject. "You're right," he murmured, feeling worthless.

The others glared at him with undisguised contempt and hostility, not noticing either. Rip let out a low growl. "Bone's right, you know. Not only does your stupid different-ness weaken yourself, but everyone around you! You're an accident waiting to happen."

The others joined in viciously with taunts and growls and death threats, but Dingo ignored them all, thinking only about what Bone had said. For the moment, it didn't matter what had happened in the past; if he had been a better brother and a better friend he might have been able to

prevent Claw's death. But instead he had been just as worthless as they all said and he knew it. If not for him, Claw would still be alive. Pain made him feel weak with grief and guilt and he knew he had to get out of there before he lost it. He didn't want to give Bone the satisfaction of seeing him break down.

He tried to push his way past Bone, but the dark dingo grabbed him and snarled, "Watch your back, Dingo. It's not just me who wants you dead. Remember: if you make one mistake, you'll be exiled. And protecting those forest animals counts as a mistake." He let go of him with a sneer and a cold laugh, but Dingo just looked away from him and walked slowly back to camp, his tail dragging against the ground.

"Why don't you take a detour to the Snake Pit?" Rip called after him.

"Yeah, they'll put you out of your misery!" one of the others added, making them all laugh.

Suddenly one of them exclaimed, "Hey, we're preparing to attack the forest food, right? Why don't we attack Dingo? He's so weak he's about on the same level as them."

"Good idea," Bone agreed; Dingo could feel his look of hatred scorching his back. Dingo knew he should run, but he didn't feel like it. Besides, Bone wouldn't kill him with Rip and Tear and the others around; he would just hurt him a lot. He was used to that. It would be useless to run anyway; they would just chase after him.

He could hear the other dingoes start to run after him, their paws thudding against the ground. Bone called for them to attack and they all leapt at him with vicious snarls. Despite the fact that he had expected it, Dingo let out a yelp of pain as they bit and scratched at him in a completely unfair fight of five against one. Fury suddenly surged through his scarred body as they shoved him to the ground, their howls echoing in his ears and their claws digging deep wounds into his bloody skin. His eyes narrowed. He was going to lose, but he was going to hurt someone first. Letting out an angry snarl, he lunged toward Bone, ignoring the sting of the other dingoes' attacks as he ripped a gash open in his side, his light brown eyes darkened in fury.

Bone let out a sharp yelp of surprise then narrowed his eyes. "Bad move," he snarled, his hate-filled eyes burning into Dingo's.

Fear momentarily made Dingo freeze, but he didn't have long to think about it because he finally began to feel the pain of the stinging wounds the other dingoes had given him. With a yelp, he fell back against the ground and winced with pain as the dingoes closed in around him. He felt a tingle of fear when his vision blurred with heat, pain, and blood. He knew there was only one way to make their attacks end so he sucked up the rest of his pride and laid on the ground, whimpering pitifully.

As expected, the dingoes stopped attacking and started laughing at him instead. Dingo bit down hard on his lip to keep himself from saying something or from getting up and attempting to rip all of them to shreds as the taunts began. Usually he could control his temper easily, unlike the other dingoes, but it was suddenly much harder. Wasn't he allowed to have any happiness?

"Look at him!" Rip exclaimed, laughing loudly. "Look at how pitiful he is!"

"Forest food would probably put up a better fight!" another dingo agreed while the rest of them leered down at him. Bone smirked at him, as well, but the dark malice in his eyes was unmistakable. Somehow Dingo managed to not look at them and stayed on the ground, waiting for them to leave.

Bone glowered at him. "I can't understand how you can stand to be *you*," he growled. "You make me sick."

"Fine, Bone. I'm worthless. I make you sick. Just leave me alone." He glanced back at the bleeding cuts that now covered most of his body.

"I don't know how you've managed to survive twelve years out here," Tear taunted, earning an approving look from Rip.

"Neither do I," Dingo muttered truthfully.

"You deserve to be an outcast," Bone snarled, shoving him hard and snapping his neck painfully as he and the other dingoes began to turn around and kick sand on him. "Something as pitiful as you deserves the lowest classification possible." It was only then that Bone and the others started to leave.

As the dingoes fell into step behind Bone, Dingo could hear them all laughing and insulting him. When they finally disappeared behind a sand dune, Dingo got up without a word, shook the sand off of himself, and padded silently through the desert. He kept his infuriated, sorrow-tinged

thoughts at bay as he walked as calmly as possible. Only when he reached his secret den and wriggled inside did he let out the furious howl that he had held in.

“Nice scars, freak. We heard how you were begging for mercy,” one of the dingoes sneered at him when Dingo trudged reluctantly back to camp. A few of the other dingoes saw him and began taunting him over his latest humiliation, but he ignored all of them and stalked toward his den where he could hopefully escape the mocking jeers of the pack members.

He was still bleeding from some of the wounds and his body stung from the sand that had seeped into the cuts, but he had gotten over the rage he had felt before. He winced when he remembered how angry he had been. Safely hidden inside his secret den, he had practically been shaking with fury as he thought of all the horrible things he wanted to do to Bone and yelled them to the walls of the den until he was over it.

He already felt guilty for letting his anger take over since that was what the other dingoes did, but he tried not to hate himself too much. After all, whether he was different or not, he still felt the rage and the urge to fight like any of the dingoes; he just chose not to pay attention to those instincts, unlike the rest of them. With a sigh, Dingo slowly lowered himself down onto the rocky floor of his den, just beginning to hope for a moment of peace when Rock’s loud voice shattered the air.

“Hey, maybe one of the forest food will kill Dingo!”

Dingo flattened his ears; clearly it had been intended for him to hear.

“They’d be doing the pack a favor!” another voice called.

Raucous laughter followed and Dingo was able to make out Rip’s distinctive laugh in the mix.

Bone’s low, gruff growl sounded from just outside, his dark tone tinged with excitement. “Never mind that,” he snarled. “Dingo could probably pass as a piece of forest food himself. But forget about him! The Hunt is going to be great!” He immediately began ordering the dingoes around. “Rip and Tear, you go to the forest to see if the forest food are coming or if you can see them through the trees. Rock, you come with me to practice fighting. The rest of the pack should practice fighting for the Hunt, as well!” he announced.

Howls of excitement and anticipation briefly filled the camp and Dingo could hear them all growling eagerly to each other.

Padding to the entrance of the den, Dingo let himself look out at what was happening in the camp. Every dingo was out of their den, looking enthusiastic about the prospect of the upcoming Hunt. Rip and Tear hurriedly left the camp to check out the forest as they had been told, while around camp everybody was either chatting excitedly, practicing fighting on their own, or going over to join Bone's group to fight. Dingo felt a snarl rise in his throat, but he withheld it, not wanting to bring attention to himself.

Looking around, he was able to recognize all of his pack mates, minus the ones that had just left to go to the forest. None of them showed an ounce of remorse at the thought of slaughtering all the forest animals. But why should they? They were just forest food, after all, the only creatures low enough to be on the same level as Dingo. He snarled bitterly to himself, but the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to help the forest animals. He was certain that they must have a way of life like the dingoes did. Maybe they had a better life.

He tried to shake the thoughts out of his head. Bone was right; he had already failed to protect his sister, Claw, so why should he torture himself by trying to look after the forest animals when they would all just be killed anyway? Despair unexpectedly washed over him and he sank to the floor of the den, not willing to go out and face the desert. Bone was right about everything, and he was wrong about everything; it finally sunk in.

He ducked his head between his paws, wanting to just disappear, but his miserable thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a sharp tap on his shoulder, a touch that was more of a slap than a tap. "Wake up, freak! We need you for something!" said a voice.

Recognizing his brother's voice, he muttered, "Get away from me, Rip. I'm not in the mood."

The slap became sharper and Rip's tone became harsher. "Nobody cares what kind of mood you're in. Now get up. Sitting around here all day is a good way to get exiled, you know."

Dingo looked up at him with narrowed light brown eyes. "Can't I ever get a break?"

“If you were anyone but you, yeah. But you’re you and everybody hates you, so no.”

“See, this is why I hate it when the pack gets excited—they always celebrate by tormenting me.” He let out a long sigh and let his head drop to the floor. “Fine, exile me. See if I care.”

“I know how to get him up,” growled a low voice from the entrance.

A flash of desperation and fear made Dingo close his eyes in an attempt to calm himself down as the sound of Bone’s voice floated over to him. He didn’t even look up. He was beyond caring about his brother and his taunts for the moment. He kept his eyes shut tight, but he could still hear Bone’s heavy paws stomping against the sandy floor of the den.

Suddenly he felt something light and soft flutter over his face, forcing his eyes to open wide in shock; he had expected Bone to rip his shoulder open or break his leg or maybe bite his throat out or something along those lines. When he saw something pink in front of his face, a pain so deep it was much worse than all of those things sliced through his heart. He couldn’t help but let out a low whimper as every part of him tensed in sadness. Bone had draped over his face the pink ribbon that Claw had always liked to wear. Dingo had kept the ribbon after his sister had died to remember her, but looking at it always seemed to cause him pain.

“*“I promised Claw I wouldn’t give up,”*” Bone quoted sourly. “What happened to that?”

“I thought you said I should forget about that stupid promise,” Dingo whispered hoarsely, too sad at the moment to be annoyed at how his voice cracked.

Although he couldn’t see him, he could guess Bone was rolling his eyes. “Follow it, forget it, I don’t care so long as you do as I say. I figured your stupid promise would get you up, though.”

“Uh...you can take that thing off your face,” Rip pointed out with a laugh.

Dingo frowned, narrowing his eyes under the cloth and not caring that they couldn’t see it. The pain was starting to ease now, although he could still taste salt in his mouth. He didn’t want to move the ribbon and have to look at them.

“Freak,” Rip scoffed.

“Get up,” Bone growled, sounding bored and annoyed. “Come on, you have to keep your stupid promise not to give up, right? I thought it meant so much to you.” He paused, then added, “Murderer,” in a low growl under his breath so that only Dingo could hear it. Dingo winced and flicked his tail roughly against the floor.

“Rip, go outside and wait. I’ll get him to come out,” Bone growled.

Rip probably shrugged and Dingo could hear the sound of paws shuffling through the sandy floor as he padded out of the den. Once he was gone, he heard Bone lean down and growl close to his covered face, “Let’s review, shall we?”

“Please, don’t,” Dingo murmured uselessly.

Bone ignored him. “Remember when Fang died?”

Dingo sighed, his breath rustling the soft pink ribbon. “Of course I do. He was Second in Command before you for thirteen years. Everyone remembers Fang’s death.”

Bone narrowed his eyes and let out a low growl since Bone had despised Fang and hated how everyone had looked up to him. Dingo just ignored him and tried not to wince at the awful memory of Fang’s death. He said nothing and after his brother paused to growl a bit longer, Bone went on, “Do you remember how Claw used to act so strange after Fang had died? Like she was, maybe, *keeping secrets*?”

Dingo pricked his ears and felt them brush the cloth. His shaggy brown tail, which had been flicking back and forth in distress, now froze just a foot above the ground. Claw had acted strangely after Fang’s death and some of it hadn’t seemed to stem from grief. He had heard her make implications that outcasts hadn’t killed Fang like the pack had thought, but when he had asked her why she thought so, she had always said she couldn’t tell him. He had wondered about that many times...

He realized then that Bone could sense his sudden stillness and hostility seemed to fill the air.

There was a hard edge to his tone as Bone prompted, “*Well?*”

Dingo paused. “It seemed like it...”

“But did she ever tell you about what she knew about Fang’s death and what kind of secrets she was keeping?”

“No.”

Bone's disbelief and anger tainted the air, but the dark dingo went on obliviously. "Apparently she didn't trust you enough to tell you anything then. Maybe if you'd been a better brother, maybe if you'd listened to her more, she would have told you and you could have saved her from suffering so much grief and pain by herself."

"I listened to her just fine," Dingo growled defensively, his anger rising. "I tried to always be there for her. She trusted me and I trusted her. *You* wouldn't know anything about it."

"Then why didn't she tell you anything important, like what she knew about Fang's death?" Bone's voice was cold and Dingo frowned when he realized that it seemed like Bone wasn't just taunting him but questioning him. He remembered what Bone had accused him of earlier: of 'knowing things.' Did Bone's strange questions have anything to do with those 'things' he thought he knew? Even if they did and even if Dingo did know what Bone was talking about, who cared? Who would listen to him? He was the most worthless dingo in the pack; no one would pay any attention to him if he tried to spread any of Bone's secrets around.

Dingo's tail brushed the floor in distress. "I don't know why she didn't tell me things like that," he finally answered Bone. "Maybe she just..." He trailed off, realizing he was about to walk right into an insult.

"Wanted to *protect* you?" Bone guessed before letting out a cruel, menacing laugh. "What'd I say? Even *you* realize how much you depended on her and how much it took out of her. Don't you think that maybe if she hadn't been so worried about taking care of her stupid, helpless brother, she wouldn't have suffered so much before she died...or she wouldn't have died at all?"

Dingo squeezed his eyes shut and shivered in pain. His tail flicked rapidly across the ground as if to show his longing to escape Bone and his own sorrow.

"Don't you think?" Bone demanded after a lengthened silence.

"Yes," Dingo finally mumbled, fighting back tears; dingoes weren't supposed to cry, and besides, he didn't want to give Bone the satisfaction of seeing him break down.

"Did you know about all the times Claw and I fought?" Bone asked suddenly, his dark tone almost cautious.



Dingo gritted his teeth, suddenly furious. “Yes, I *knew* about all those times. You just couldn’t rest until you made her life even more difficult, could you? I can’t believe you actually lured her out of camp just to attack her one time. You’re sick.”

Suddenly rage was pouring off of Bone to the point where it was nearly tangible. “So she told you about that?”

“It wasn’t too hard to find out,” he snapped back. He lifted the cloth from his face with one paw to glare at Bone from where he was laying. “I can’t believe you constantly hurt her and made her feel so bad! You know she thought of you as a friend once upon a time, right?”

Bone snorted derisively. “Somehow I doubt she’d feel that way now, dead or not. Claw was never a friend of mine. We’ve always hated each other.” Bone glared at him defensively, his hatred and Dingo’s suspicion making the air thick and tense. “We fought all the time.”

“And it doesn’t make you any less despicable!” Dingo snarled. “Actually, considering you don’t care at all about hurting others, I guess I shouldn’t wonder about whether you could have killed anyone in the past! I should just *know*!”

Bone shoved his fangs in his face and let out a furious snarl. “*You. Know. Nothing!*”

Dingo tensed with fear but forced himself to remain in place and hold his ground. Before he could say anything else, Bone snarled, “Nobody cares how many dingoes I fought with. The pack loves fighting. What I did then and now is no different from what any pack member would do.” He was only slightly more in control of himself as he pulled away from Dingo, lashing his dark brown-black tail to try to control his fury.

Dingo sighed. “Fine, but that’s only because the pack has the most despicable set of ‘laws’ I’ve ever heard of.”

“Watch it. Don’t forget you’re talking to the Second in Command.”

“I won’t forget,” Dingo retorted. “In fact, I’m wondering just what you had to do to get that position.”

The silence that stretched out between them was violent and deadly. Dingo quickly scrabbled to his paws, pushing the pink cloth behind him as he tensed for a fight and silently cursing himself. Who in their right mind said something like that to Bone when he was *already* trying to kill him?

After the silence lasted for another long moment, Bone growled in a low, dangerous tone, "Say one word about that and I'll kill you. Painfully. I won't hesitate to push you in the Snake Pit and hope the snakes eat you alive. I'll claw you. I'll rip your throat out. I'll kill anyone else you get close to first just to hurt you. I'll drag your suffering out for as long as I can before I finish you off." His amber eyes were narrowed and darkened with more hatred than Dingo would have thought possible for anyone to have. If looks could kill... "You know *nothing*," Bone growled.

"I know nothing," Dingo agreed quickly, wanting to avoid bloodshed, if possible.

"Get back down on the ground in that pathetic position and grovel," Bone commanded fiercely.

He didn't want to, but he also didn't want to have to fight Bone, at least not yet. It might be inevitable, but Dingo wanted to put it off as long as he could. With a sigh, he slowly dropped back down to the floor, letting out a low whimper to appease his tyrant brother and surrendering any last scraps of pride he had left.

Still glaring at him, Bone snarled through gritted teeth, "Good. Now are you coming or not? *Crawl* on the way out."

Dingo sighed internally, though he still felt numb with fear and anger. He had wanted to give up and lay there in his den, but between his old promise to Claw and Bone provoking him, that wasn't going to happen. His old suspicions were beginning to surface again and he desperately needed to know if they were true. What *had* Bone done to obtain power? Could he really be...a killer?

It was probably obvious, but unless Bone finally admitted it to him or until he had any other solid proof, he couldn't make himself believe it. Shockingly, he still had one tiny scrap of compassion left for his brother even after all that had happened.

"Well?"

"I'm coming," Dingo muttered, grabbing Claw's old ribbon and putting it safely out of sight.

"And?"

He sighed. "I'll crawl."

A satisfied sneer twitched at Bone's lips, but his eyes remained dark. "Good. Come on then." He started toward the entrance then stopped and

turned back to Dingo. "One more thing..."

Dingo sighed but laid in silence, waiting for Bone to continue.

Ignoring him entirely, Bone went on, "Do you remember that night about a year ago when Claw disappeared then came back all scratched up?"

Dingo could guess at what he was talking about, but nonetheless he glanced up at him, waiting for him to specify. This time his brother's face wasn't triumphant as he realized how much pain he was causing Dingo, just suspicious and cautious. In a way, it almost seemed like Bone was interrogating him.

"That one night," Bone explained, "a few weeks before she died when she came back to our den with those deep scratches. Don't you remember? She was completely covered in blood, her throat was all raw, she had lots of bruises, and blood dripped out of her mouth." Dingo winced at the ghastly memory of his poor sister; yes, he remembered that night well. He had never been more terrified for Claw in his life than at that moment.

He still had no idea what could have possibly happened to her, but one day, she went out into the desert and didn't return for a long time. When she *had* returned later at night, she had woken up Dingo after clawing Bone, who wasn't Second in Command yet and therefore still shared a den with his siblings. When he had seen her, he had almost fainted in shock. She had looked horrible with blood dripping from her fur, deep red scars covering her scraped body, and light brown eyes wild with fear and disbelief. She could barely walk without wincing and when she opened her mouth to speak, blood had oozed out from a deep gash on her throat.

Dingo's brothers had been terrified by her gruesome appearance and they hadn't wanted to get near her. Bone had seemed the most terrified of them all, more than he would have liked to realize. He had looked oddly pale, as if he had seen a ghost.

"What about that night?" Dingo muttered. "Do you have to bring it up?"

Bone ignored him. "Do you remember what she said had done that to her?"

Dingo remembered what Claw had told them: that outcasts had attacked her and done all that damage to her. She hadn't looked any of them in the eye when she had muttered it to the ground and Dingo couldn't

believe that outcasts could have done something so horrible to her. No dingo should have been capable of doing such horrid things to her, but he couldn't think of anything else that could have done it. "She said outcasts did it to her," he muttered, answering the question and leaving his own commentary out of it.

"You don't believe that, do you?"

"Do you?" Dingo replied; he hadn't meant it to be a challenge, but now that he said it, it sounded like one. Bone's amber eyes narrowed. "I mean, I don't know," Dingo amended. "It doesn't seem possible."

"Then what do you think happened to her?" Bone spat out.

"I don't know," he answered truthfully.

Bone narrowed his eyes and studied him for a long moment before finally turning away with a low growl and stalking out of the den. "Come on," he snarled, adding with a cold laugh, "And don't forget to crawl."

Closing his eyes briefly, Dingo checked to make sure Claw's old ribbon was safe again. Seeing that it was, he took a deep, calming breath and then slowly began to crawl after Bone, trying hard not to think about what he was doing and trying to push away the humiliation scorching his fur.

He knew his dignity had officially dropped down into negative numbers when he forced himself to crawl out of the den to where Bone was waiting triumphantly with Rip, Tear, and Rock. Bone had carefully erased all signs that they had been fighting from his dark gaze and Dingo made sure to keep his expression blank as he slunk toward Bone and his lackeys. At that point, he wasn't sure who he loathed more: Bone or himself. Burning with humiliation, he let out a low growl when Bone finally let him get to his paws. "Happy, Bone?" he muttered, staring at his paws as shame seared in his chest, making him want to disappear into thin air or die.

Bone leered at him triumphantly. "I'm appeased for now."

"Great," he muttered, wishing he could claw the smirk off his brother's face. He had to force himself to keep still as the taunting began.

"Look at Dingo—did you see how pathetic he was!" called a mocking voice.

"Hey, Dingo, why don't you bow to me, too?" taunted another.

"No dignity!"

"How can you stand yourself, freak?!"

“You make me sick!”

The voices continued from all directions, mocking, superior-sounding, scornful...It seemed like every dingo in camp had some comment to make. Their scathing taunts made his fur feel uncomfortably hot as his eyes remained locked on the ground, their light brown depths burning with shame. All he wanted to do was run away from all their scornful jeers, but that would just provoke more mocking about him being some coward who couldn't take it. Instead he forced himself to stand there and endure it until one of the insults finally made him wince.

“If Claw could see your pathetic display, I'm sure she'd be disappointed.”

Dingo's sad brown eyes flashed to Bone's cold, sneering face and pain stabbed into his heart. “Yeah, I guess so,” he muttered, hating himself even more fiercely. Why did he have to let Claw down all the time? Trying not to think about it, he muttered, “Now that you finally got me to come out, what did you want me for?”

“We need another dingo to fight with us,” Rip explained with a hostile glance. “And like we said before, you're about the equivalent of forest food, so beating you will be good practice for the Hunt.”

“Not to mention *fun*,” Tear put in from where he stood at Rip's side.

“I don't fight,” Dingo pointed out futilely.

“Then we'll fight and you'll get beaten,” Rock snarled.

“Exactly,” Rip put in.

“So basically you want to use me as your practice dummy?” Dingo growled, searching their faces to see if they were serious. They were. “And you actually expect me to go along with this?”

They nodded.

“You actually expect me to just stand here while the rest of you jump on me and rip me to pieces?”

They nodded.

Rip glared at him. “Come on, Dingo. It's no worse than what you've already been through and what we already make you do.”

“Whether you agree or not, we'll still attack you,” Tear added while Bone just leered at him with dark, gleaming eyes.

“Although we'd appreciate it if you didn't make it so easy,” Rip spoke up.

“The least you could do is fight back a little,” Rock agreed.

“Don’t you have any sense of self-preservation?” Tear growled.

“It’s not like you’re planning on killing me, right?” Dingo muttered.

“Well, no,” Bone admitted, but what he was really saying and what Dingo really heard was: *Not yet*.

“We’ll just tear you up a little,” Rip agreed cheerfully.

“How nice.” Dingo sighed, knowing he couldn’t exactly argue with them; they’d just jump on him anyway. “Fine, go ahead and attack me. I don’t care anymore.”

Rip frowned. “At least try to fight back a little bit!”

“Fine, whatever you say, Rip,” he muttered, gazing dully off into the distance.

Bone sauntered toward him before lowering his voice and growling, “I’ll make sure you never forget who you’re messing with. The Hunt will be even better than I thought once you’re taken care of.”

Dingo just stared lifelessly back at him, although fear was slowly creeping up his spine. Bone meant what he said; that much he knew. He watched sadly as Bone raised a menacing paw and winced even before his brother struck a blow. Now he could understand why he sympathized with the forest animals: just as they would be, he was already being hunted, then tortured, and soon he would be killed.

# Chapter Eleven

## Insanity

As the burning rays of the rising sun scorched the warm desert sand, Dingo slowly opened his dull light brown eyes and let out a groan when his body seared with pain. Looking back, he winced when he examined the bloody, stinging sand caked around his wounds. Dragging himself miserably to his paws, he pricked his ears when he realized that the normally peaceful silence of the morning had been interrupted by an excited commotion from outside. The sounds of the celebration going on in the camp drifted into the den, making a low growl rumble in his throat. Did the pack really have to make such a big deal about their plan to slaughter the forest animals? He sighed and bleakly wondered how many forest animals would be killed; he felt bad for them since they didn't even know what was coming. He winced at another thought. How many of them would lose family or friends...how many of them would *want* to die afterward? How many would end up just like him?

Trying not to think about it since there was nothing he could do, he forced himself to walk out of the den where he was instantly greeted by insults and wishes that he would be killed in the Hunt. Sometimes he wished that, too. Instinctively, his eyes searched the crowd for his brothers and his gaze darkened when he saw Bone, Rip, and Tear sitting outside the Second in Command's den with Rock, grinning and talking about the Hunt with eager, excited voices. Dingo stared intently at Bone before he quickly reminded himself that it was hopeless to try to understand what had happened in his past.

He tried to shake the thoughts out of his head as his attention returned to the forest animals. This 'Hunt' wouldn't just be bad for them; it would be bad for him. He could practically read the minds of the dingoes around him since all of them must be wondering the same thing: how to get rid of him when the Hunt officially began. Especially Bone. The cold Second in Command was probably getting ready to 'accidentally' sink his

teeth into Dingo's throat and say he'd mistaken him for forest food or leave his body lying in the sand for the pack to find and claim the forest animals had killed him. No matter what Bone's plan was, he was in danger and he hardly even cared; he had been in danger many times before and he had somehow managed to deal with it then. Maybe he would get lucky this time and one of the dingoes *would* manage to kill him.

Dingo drifted out of his thoughts as he walked unhappily out of camp, ignoring the leers from his pack mates and trying not to wince when his injuries burned with pain. When he finally left the camp and bounded off into the huge desert, he felt a rush of freedom and relief, never noticing the gleaming amber eyes that followed him.

After several minutes of running, he let himself slow down when he realized he could no longer see the camp. He hung his head, trying to forget all about the evil dingoes back at camp. Without meaning to, he found himself wishing Claw could be there to help him. She would have the guts to protest against hunting the forest animals and she would have the kindness to stand by him when the pack turned against them. Not for the first time, Dingo wondered if he should just lay down and die. He was probably going to be killed in the Hunt, anyway, and even if he wasn't, Bone was planning on killing him regardless of the Hunt. He couldn't avoid him forever.

As he walked on and on through the desert, nearly oblivious to his surroundings, he turned the idea of death over in his mind. What would it be like? Would his sister be there? He couldn't help feeling a prickle of fear as he wondered about the unknown. There might not be anything afterward, but he couldn't bear to let himself think that. He couldn't imagine being able to go on if Claw had just stopped existing when she died.

Even as he thought about it, he sighed, knowing he could never let Claw down by giving up even though it seemed so much easier than living; he had to keep his promise to Claw. He paused, feeling a sharp stab of pain as he remembered the promise he had made to her and the night she had asked him to make it. He remembered every detail from that night so long ago and as he thought about his promise, it was almost as if he was transported back in time to the moment just hours before her death.

*"Dingo, I want you to promise me one thing," she had said that night as they stood outside their den, staring up at the dark, starry sky. Her*



words had sounded strained and sad. When she had turned to face him, her light brown eyes had seemed troubled. "Can you do that for me?"

"Of course!" he'd said, glancing over at her with a surprised, questioning gaze. He would have done anything for her.

"Well, I know things are hard right now and it might get much worse in the future, but I want you to promise me that no matter what happens, you'll never give up and you'll keep going. You'll keep on trying to make a difference and keep the truth about the pack alive. Promise me."

Dingo had paused, wondering what she was getting at. He already knew things were hard; everything in the desert was hard. At the time, he hadn't known just how much worse things could be, but he knew that he would never give up as long as she was with him. He had quickly agreed, although he hadn't known exactly what she was asking. "I promise, Claw," he had told her sincerely. "But what...?"

She had interrupted before he could ask what all of that was about. Her gaze was sad. "I hope you mean that. You have to keep that promise. You have to."

"I will," he'd assured her, still confused. "But what's all this about?"

She hadn't really answered his question. She just said with a sad smile, "Nothing. I just wanted to make sure you'll be all right."

He had still felt a little confused, wondering where all of that had come from, but he'd just shrugged, not wanting to pester her, and said, "Okay. Thanks."

She had smiled sadly back at him and after a long silence, she said in a voice just barely over a whisper, "I don't care what the rest of the pack thinks. You're the greatest dingo I've ever known."

Dingo had felt a warm glow of happiness but also guilt; he didn't deserve a sister like her. "You're an even greater dingo, Claw."

She had shaken her head sadly. "I didn't do anything, really. But you still have a chance to."

He had frowned in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Again, she had shaken her head. "Nothing."

He had blinked then just smiled and said, "You did do something, Claw. You knew the truth, you stood up for what you believed in, you helped whoever you could...no dingo could ask for more."

*She had given him a sad smile. "Thank you. I have to ask something now."*

*"What?"*

*She had taken a deep breath. "I'm going to be careful, but I want to change the pack and I want to make a difference. I have to do that now. I don't know exactly what I'm going to do, but I'm going out into the desert tonight to plan. Do you want to come with me?"*

*He had been silent for a long time, thinking about it. He had wanted to go with her, but he hadn't wanted to get her hopes up. Changing the pack was impossible. Hadn't she seen that? He had thought about stopping her, but he hadn't wanted to upset her either. Eventually, he had thought that if he didn't go, maybe she wouldn't go either and nothing bad could happen. Finally, he had murmured, "I'm sorry, Claw, but there's nothing we can do. There's only two of us and I don't think we'll ever be able to change the pack. I don't want to hurt you, but..."*

*As the memory flashed through his mind, a voice in the back of his head screamed, "No! Go with her! She'll die!" but nothing changed. The two dingoes from his memory ignored the warning and Dingo felt suddenly weak as the scene played out before him, forcing him to watch as if he was an outsider seeing it from afar, unable to stop it.*

*"It's okay." Dingo winced when Claw's soft voice seemed to tickle his ears. "I understand..."*

*Shaking his head almost violently, Dingo pushed Claw's words out of his mind and winced when they began to fade, leaving him feeling numb and hollow. Tiny hints of her voice seemed to echo in his ears, trying desperately to explain to him why she was leaving, why she had left, before he pushed the memories away. Tears pricked his eyes when her last words echoed in his mind.*

*"I'll see you next morning."*

*He would not see her the next morning. He would never see her again.*

*The last time he saw her was that night before she left...it was the last time he would ever speak to her again...the last time he would ever see her smile...the last time they would ever face the desert together...the last time he would ever be happy...*

Dingo hadn't realized he was crying until he tore himself out of the torturous memory, blinking rapidly and trying not to cry out as he struggled to wipe away the tears. He took deep, shuddering breath as he tried to pull himself together, only to freeze in shock when a sudden cold voice behind him snarled, "What's the matter, Dingo? Claw's not around to wipe your tears? Too bad your only protection is long dead and buried in the ground."

*Bone.* If Bone wanted to kill him, let him. It wasn't like Dingo was in any state to fight. Unfortunately, his memory flashed to the front of his mind, reminding him he couldn't give up. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling like a huge burden was crushing him yet again. When he had made that promise to Claw, he hadn't known exactly what he was promising and even though he knew he should stick it, he suddenly didn't want to.

"What do you want, Bone?" he called miserably.

Almost instantly, a heavy paw shoved him to the ground and he let out a yelp when a gruff voice growled in his ear, "Hello, murderer."

"Get off!"

Bone chuckled darkly. "Why? Don't you want to die?"

"Yes! No! Sort of! Just get off!"

"Confused, Dingo?" He could hear the cold amusement in his brother's voice.

"Just shut up!" he shouted. "I'm sick of you and I'm not in the mood for this!"

Bone's tone hardened. "Don't forget who you're talking to."

"A murderer, probably," Dingo muttered under his breath.

"It takes one to know one," Bone retorted.

Dingo winced and gritted his teeth. "I'm not a killer!"

Bone snorted. "Sure you are, but regardless, I hope you enjoyed your trip down memory lane, Dingo. How do I know? Well, you always look like this after you remember stupid little Claw. I really don't know why you miss her so much—she was worthless."

"Don't say that!" Dingo snarled, suddenly furious as he threw Bone off and whirled around to glare at him, his eyes burning with fury.

Bone easily picked himself up and sneered at him. "You and Claw were cursed the day you were born—you were cursed with a life of suffering and she was cursed with you as a brother," he taunted. A scowl creased his face. "Stop fighting fate and just die already."

Dingo growled. "Don't you have anything better to do than torment me and try unsuccessfully to kill me?" he snapped.

"I'll kill you somehow," Bone replied. He leapt toward him again, but Dingo had already turned and darted away.

He ran until he was as far away as he could get, panting from the exhaustion of fleeing so quickly. Sitting down to catch his breath, he looked around to make sure Bone hadn't follow him then tried to tell himself that what his brother was implying wasn't true, that Claw hadn't thought of him as worthless and that he hadn't ruined her life. It was very hard to convince himself of that when he was already sure that he *was* the reason she was dead.

As despair crept in on him, stabbing at his frantically beating heart, he suddenly had one last desperate thought: maybe if he found out who really killed her, he would stop feeling so guilty and life would be a little easier. Maybe he would be better off if he just knew the truth...but where could he find the truth in a place as lawless and untrustworthy as the desert?

Almost instantly, a memory popped into his head and his eyes opened wide. *Of course!* "Her journal..." he murmured as he remembered the small book his sister had liked to write in. "*Don't read that.*" She had told him that once when he had caught her writing in it. "*Not until much, much later,*" she had said. "*I think you'll understand when you do.*" With a flash of surprise, he realized that the answer could have been there all along and that it was waiting for him back at camp.

Leaping to his paws, he raced back to camp as fast as he could, thinking only about what he might find in Claw's old journal. Since Claw had told him not to read it, he had all but forgotten about it. Now that he thought about it, he remembered seeing her journal sitting beside the old pink ribbon she used to wear in the corner of his den where he had put them after she died. Dingo's heart beat faster as he sprinted through the desert, his shaggy tail streaming out behind him. His eyes widened when he realized that all his answers could have been right under his nose the whole time.

After what seemed like ages, Dingo finally reached the camp and raced to his den, heading for the small alcove in the right corner of the den where he kept Claw's old belongings. His eyes opened wide and his heart

skipped a beat when he reached into the alcove then froze. His heart stopped dead when he peered down into the alcove and realized with a sinking feeling of dismay that both Claw's ribbon and her journal were nowhere to be found.

His mind whirling with panic and alarm, he instantly turned to search the tiny den for any sign of them, only to stumble back in shock when he realized the two treasures were gone. Feeling baffled and horrified that he had somehow lost his last two connections to his sister, he froze when he heard a low growl from the entrance of the den.

"Looking for something, Dingo?"

A long heartbeat of silence passed between them. Dingo slowly turned around to see his brother standing in the doorway, holding Claw's journal and ribbon in front of him. A flash of horror and desperation shot up Dingo's spine like a jolt of electricity as he stumbled helplessly toward Bone. "Give those back!" he exclaimed.

Bone backed out of the den, still holding the ribbon and the journal. "I don't think so," he growled, a grin spreading across his face.

A growl rumbled in Dingo's throat as he followed Bone out into the camp. His eyes narrowed as he snarled, "Fine, Bone. You finally provoked me. I'll fight you to get those back!"

But his brother shook his head. "No, that's not what I want this time."

"Then what *do* you want?" Dingo exclaimed. His heart beat faster and panicked tears swam before his eyes. It wasn't just because one of those things might hold the answer to his questions; they were his last connections to Claw. How could he bear it if he lost them to Bone?

"Will you do anything to get them back?"

"Yes, anything!" Fear and apprehension made his stomach churn as he said it. He was suddenly terrified of what that 'anything' could include, but he didn't care what Bone made him do as long as he got Claw's two treasures back. By now, the whole camp was looking at him, some in amusement, others in disgust.

Bone seemed to think for a long moment before a wide grin spread over his face. "Beg for it."

The camp went silent as Dingo froze and stood absolutely still, blinking as if not quite sure what to feel. He opened his mouth, but no words came out as a cold sense of despair shivered down his spine. It

seemed as if the whole camp stood still and watched as he stared at Bone with wide, desperate eyes. After what felt like hours, Dingo finally shook himself and faced Bone. "Fine," he shouted. "If I do it, will you give them back?"

"Sure," Bone agreed, his eyes glinting with amusement and a tinge of surprise that quickly turned to scorn. "I didn't think you'd really do it, though."

"I don't have anything left to lose," Dingo replied, edging toward panic. "You'll give them back?"

"Yeah. But you have to be convincing first."

Dingo nodded frantically, his eyes wide and bloodshot. He flinched as the panic slowly began to die away and be replaced by a deep sense of humiliation. Swinging his head around, he stared at all of the pack members, swallowing hard and trying not to whimper when their dark, sneering gazes burned into his fur. Slowly he turned around to face his brother, his wide, pleading gaze met only with cold, taunting eyes. Shivering, Dingo looked down at Claw's ribbon and journal and then back at Bone, his messy brown fur shuddered as he met his brother's hard, triumphant sneer.

Squeezing his eyes shut as tightly as he could, he forced himself to go to a happier place in his mind—a place undoubtedly with Claw—and fell back onto his hind legs.

"He's really going to do it!" one of the dingoes exclaimed with a scornful laugh.

"He has no shame," another dingo snarled disgustedly.

Somehow managing to ignore their taunts, Dingo stayed on his hind legs and let out a pitiful whimper, forcing himself not to think about it as shame burned through his body. Almost instantly, half the camp burst into laughter while the other half growled disdainfully. Bone was among the ones laughing until finally he threw Claw's stuff at him. Dingo immediately grabbed Claw's treasures and raced back to his den to hide.

"We should kick him out of camp!" snarled a voice from outside. "We don't need dingoes as pathetic as him here!"

"At least we get a good laugh out of it!" snorted another.

Ignoring their sneering voices, Dingo rapidly stuffed Claw's ribbon back into the alcove in the corner of the small den and desperately opened

the journal. He instantly let out a sharp yelp of despair. *Bone*. Fury and distress flowed through his scarred body as he stared at the torn, empty journal and realized that the pages had been ripped out of it.

“How *dare* he...?”

Whatever evidence might have been written on those pages didn’t even matter anymore. Claw had poured her heart out into that book and the words she had written reminded him of how kind she had been and how wonderful life had been when she was alive. Now that those words were gone, he felt almost empty as he realized that Bone had stolen not just pages in a book, but Claw’s words, Claw’s happiness and sadness, every memory she had written about; he had stolen Dingo’s last link to Claw, his last memento of his once happy life.

A low growl rumbled in his throat as he stormed out of the den, ignoring the increased volume of the dingoes’ laughter and scorn as he showed his face again.

He couldn’t have cared less about what any of them thought as he stalked over to Bone and snarled, “Where are the *pages*?!”

Bone grinned. “Did you like the surprise?”

Dingo’s eyes narrowed. “Where are they?” he shouted, his voice echoing through the crowd of snickering dingoes.

“You sound like you’re losing your mind!” Rip called from where he stood a few paces away.

Dingo paused. Was he? Probably. Who cared? He had a right to lose his mind.

“Yeah, Dingo!” Tear agreed, ever-present at Rip’s side. “Have you finally snapped after all this time?”

Ignoring them, Dingo glared and snarled at Bone, “Are you going to tell me or not?”

Bone feigned an innocent expression. “The pages were missing?”

Dingo shook his head slowly. “If only I could kill you...”

Bone laughed humorlessly with a suddenly hostile gaze. “Go ahead and try, Dingo. In fact, why haven’t you attacked me yet?”

“I don’t know, but I think you’re right about one thing: I’m an idiot. If being different has caused me all this trouble, then why do I keep it up?” He shook his head and turned around, shaking with rage and desperation as a vicious snarl tore out of his throat. “I wish you were dead. I wish the

whole pack was dead. I wish *I* was dead!” Letting out a furious growl, he stalked toward the camp entrance, refusing to look at anyone as he passed.

His mind whirled with hate and panic as he stormed past the mocking dingoes, his heart racing with desperation to get away from them. How was he ever going to get the pages back? What had Bone done with them? A violent shudder coursed through his body as he realized that he had lost something of Claw’s after he had already humiliated himself. He felt like he was drowning in sorrow; he had lost another part of her that he had tried desperately to keep. How long before he lost the ribbon, too? How long before he lost the rest of his mind?

He tore his way through the camp, his sore paws beating frantically against the rough desert sand as he fought to escape, tripping past laughing pack members and swerving between groups of dingoes. A drop of sweat dripped down his face. He had to get out of there before he lost it. He moved faster, no longer caring when one of the dingoes lashed out at him or tried to stop him as he burst out of the camp and took off into the desert as fast as his stiff legs could carry him.

As he raced blindly through the desert, he was sure he must look horrible, with barely-healed scars lining every inch of his body, dark bags under his eyes from lack of sleep, a pale, haunted expression from the latest experience, and eyes that were wild, bloodshot, and lifeless...

Fearful tears pricked his eyes when he realized how insane he must look. Deep shivers raced down his spine as he forced himself to keep moving, desperate to get away. How much longer could he go on like this? Did Claw really expect him to go through all this just to keep the truth alive? How could she ask him to keep going and keep enduring this painful torture? He wouldn’t wish this on his worst enemy...

He shivered violently then let out a cry of shock when he stumbled forward, his wild, frantic eyes opening wide as he collapsed on the ground. A jolt of agony raced up his spine and he burst into tears. “*Why?! Why?! Why?!*” he shouted. He buried his face in his shaking paws as a loud howl tore out of his chest. “I can’t take it anymore,” he gasped. “I don’t know what to do. Someone help me, please! I’m sorry, Claw, I’m sorry. It’s my fault you’re dead. I can never do anything right. You should have trusted someone else. I can’t take it! I’m going to fail you *again*. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...!”



He fell silent, his entire body shaking with sobs. The other dingoes were right about one thing: he deserved to die. "My fault," he whispered. "All my fault."

He cut off with a gasp of alarm when a sudden low chuckle sounded from behind him. "Go ahead and blame yourself, Dingo. Since it is your fault."

Dingo buried his head deeper into his paws. "So kill me."

"I won't kill you if you want to die."

Dingo looked up and glared at his oldest brother as Bone sneered down at him. The dark dingo's triumphant grin grew wider as he took in Dingo's disheveled appearance and grief-stricken expression.

"So is that how I keep you off my back?" Dingo snapped. He winced when his voice broke on every word.

"I'll know whether you're serious or not," Bone replied calmly.

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "Let me guess. You won't kill me when I want to die because you want me to suffer. Thanks a lot."

Bone shrugged. "Well, that, and if you're too preoccupied with being depressed, I won't have to worry about you telling my secrets to anyone. I know you know them."

"You sicken me."

"You utterly disgust me," Bone retorted. "Why do you keep making yourself suffer? Do you just like pain?"

"I asked you to kill me!" Annoyance edged his tone as he glared up at Bone. "What more do you want?"

He grinned. "I think I finally pushed you over the edge," he growled.

"Congratulations," Dingo replied flatly.

"Claw."

Dingo winced at just hearing her name like Bone probably wanted him to. Bone grinned. "This could be fun."

Dingo glared at him. "Leave me alone."

"No, I think I'll just stay here and watch you blame yourself for your sister's death." Dingo said nothing and Bone went on with a roll of his eyes, "Has it ever occurred to you that this is why you have so many problems? You don't see the rest of us moping over the death of someone who's been gone for a year. You see, Dingo, this is why we should have

exiled you long ago. I bet you regret the day Claw helped you learn how to fight so you could stay alive and stay in the pack.”

“At least it made her happy.”

Bone blinked then snarled at him, narrowing his eyes in hostility and disgust. “Is that all you ever care about? Claw, Claw, Claw, Claw, Claw?! Don’t you even care about yourself?”

“No. Leave me alone. I wish I was dead. Does any of that answer your question?”

Bone shook his head. “You’re a freak, Dingo. There’s a fine line between caring and obsession.”

“Fine, I’m obsessed.”

“She’s *dead*.”

Dingo winced. “Stop talking about it. I’m well aware that she’s no longer alive.”

“So you go on, why? Oh—because you have to fulfill some stupid promise you made to her before she died, as if that would make everything better, as if that could somehow make up for what a worthless brother you’ve been to her for eleven years.” Bone’s gaze was scornful. “Stop being so delusional, Dingo. Your suffering is entertaining, but if you think it’s going to help you make it up to Claw for how useless you’ve been, you’re wrong. She’s been dead for a year now and things have just gotten worse for you—for good reason, too.”

“You’re wrong,” Dingo snarled, his voice quivering.

“Am I?” Bone retorted. “Who in their right mind would suffer like you have for anything? All you want to do is try to convince yourself that you didn’t fail and that it *isn’t* your fault Claw died by keeping this stupid promise. Look, no matter what you do, it’s never going to change anything. Claw’s still dead and it’s still your fault.”

Dingo squeezed his eyes shut and turned away as every inch of his body seared with pain. “Why?” he choked out. “Why do I have to suffer? What did I ever do to deserve this?”

Bone snorted. “You went against the way of the pack. I can’t believe you haven’t realized how wrong you are about everything by now. Even you must realize that there was something wrong with the way you were so weak you had to depend on Claw for everything and then not give anything back. What’s that called? Selfishness? She fought every one of your battles.

She stayed up every night for you. She let herself suffer for you. And she died for you. Always you. Everything that ever went wrong in her life is your fault and you think you can make her happy and make it better by trying to do something after she's already dead. Here's a hint: nothing will ever change and you will never be able to repay her; she's *dead*."

Dingo gritted his teeth together, feeling tears sting his face as he staggered to his paws. He looked at Bone's face through a flood of tears one last time before running away as fast as he could, not caring about where he was going, just needing to get away. But even as he ran, he knew that he could never escape his own guilt. *Everything that went wrong in her life was his fault*. Looking back, he knew without a doubt how true that was. He had ruined everything; Claw would still be alive and happy if he hadn't been such a horrible companion. Why couldn't Claw have found a better friend than him? Couldn't she have just ignored him and been friends with other dingoes?

Letting a loud, desperate cry, he ran as fast as he could to get as far away from Bone as possible until his paws finally grew tired and he stumbled onto the desert floor. He let out a gasp. "I'm sorry, Claw."

Gasping and sobbing with grief and pain, he laid there for a long time, drowning in tears and misery and feeling more alone and depressed than ever. He didn't know what to do. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to escape, no one to turn to, nothing that could help him. He had no one and he couldn't do this anymore; it was just too hard and he couldn't stand it. He couldn't think straight or breathe right or even walk right anymore, not since Claw's death; he couldn't sleep at night or eat right since everything always tasted like salt. He couldn't do *anything* right. Everybody hated him and wanted him dead and Claw was gone and there was no way he could change the pack. Life was pointless and it wasn't worth this kind of suffering.

Nobody would even care if he died. He had already lost everything and everything he loved was gone... His sister was gone, dead. The pages in her journal, one of his last connections to her, were gone. All three of his brothers despised him, his mother hadn't so much as looked at him in twelve years, and his father wanted him dead just as much as Bone did. Nobody cared about him back at the pack; the only reason they had anything to do with him was so that they could someday rejoice over his

dead body. None of them would ever listen to him and he was doomed to be the different one, the wrong one, the hated one for the rest of his life. He was all alone. The one dingo that could have made everything okay was dead. And Bone was right: it was his fault. Everything was his fault. It always had been. His sister was dead, all because of him...

Dingo didn't know how long he laid there, sobbing on the desert floor and begging for his suffering to end. He didn't want to feel the sting of the wounds the dingoes dealt onto him on a daily basis. He didn't want to look at his brothers and see only scorn in their eyes. He didn't want to see his mother glare at him and ignore him when he tried to call her 'Mom' instead of 'Sand.' He didn't want to hear the pack members taunting him every time he stepped into camp and he didn't want to hear his brother cackling at him and growling about how Claw's death was all his fault. Most of all, he didn't want to spend the rest of his life remembering every detail of Claw's death not only every waking moment, but in his nightmares, as well. He didn't want his only memory of his sister to be reduced to the one of her lying bloodied in the center of the camp, her eyes closed forever.

He didn't know what to do or what to think or where to go or what to believe... He didn't know anything anymore. He tried to think, to figure out where to go from there, but there was nowhere *to* go. He tried to figure out how to do *something*, how to save himself, how to make all the pain go away, but pain was the only thing he knew anymore. He shivered, but just as he felt himself finally start to give in, he remembered his promise to Claw. That was the only thing he had left. Among everything he had lost, that was the only thing he had left to hang onto: words, spoken a year ago in the dead of night. Maybe it was stupid to try to repay Claw just by keeping his promise, but it was the only thing he knew and it was the only thing he could do. It was the only thing that made sense to him, the only thing that could save him.

After what felt like an eternity, he forced himself to his paws again and struggled to keep moving. He didn't want to keep walking; he wanted to just lay in the desert and not move ever again, but he knew he couldn't give up. He couldn't let Claw down. He forced himself to think only of Claw. No matter what she thought of him and no matter how bad he felt, he had to keep his promise, not to alleviate his guilt, but to try to do something

for her. He had tried and failed to make her happy when she was alive, so he couldn't fail again.

He shuddered at the thought, but quickly raced through the desert, trying to calm himself down and reminding himself again and again that he couldn't disappoint Claw. It didn't matter who was right, him or Bone—all he wanted to do was keep his promise. He hoped that if there was something after death, Claw was content there and he hoped he was making her happy. He thought of how close they had been and made himself forget what Bone had said; he shouldn't doubt their friendship when it had been so strong.

When Claw had died, Dingo had been sure there was nothing else to live for. As far as he was concerned, there still wasn't, but Claw must have thought there was if she had made him make that promise. If suffering and surviving were the last things he could do for her, then that was what he would do.

Somehow he made his paws move and he let them carry him back to camp where he soon flopped down on the floor of his den, realizing that it was only a few hours until nighttime. A few last tears slid miserably down his face until finally he cried himself to sleep and all the pain disappeared into nothing but blackness.

Dusty sunlight filtered in through the tiny hole in his den as Dingo's eyes slowly began to open. Their dull light brown depths darkened as all the pain from last night came flooding back to him. Wincing, he carefully rose to his paws and looked out from his den. His ears drooped as he gazed out at the sunny camp and watched the dingoes pad from den to den, their eyes glowing with a happiness he had long forgotten. Letting out a long sigh, he slowly took a step forward then glanced back, pausing when something caught his eye. Turning around, he let out a gasp when his eyes fell on a stack of yellowed papers lying just behind him.

Dingo's eyes widened and he immediately dove forward to examine them. He gasped when he recognized his sister's handwriting and felt a rare surge of joy as he realized that somehow the pages from her journal were back. Almost afraid to believe Claw's pages were truly back, he quickly read one of the journal entries, smiling weakly at the familiar memories it brought and feeling relieved when he realized all the pages were there.

Letting out a soft, calming breath, he grabbed the journal that was lying nearby and slipped the pages into the book before shutting it tight to keep them from falling out. At the moment, it didn't matter what sort of evidence there could be in that book. He had the pages back; that was enough. He would look for clues some other time when he wasn't bordering on insanity.

It was then that he wondered where the pages had come from. Bone wouldn't have given them back—he knew losing them tormented Dingo and he had already proven he didn't have a heart. Bone had probably hidden them somewhere, but how had they wound up back in his den? *Rip*. The thought brought a weak smile to his face as he realized that one of Bone's lackeys might have known where he'd hidden the pages. Rip could have brought them to him. It surprised him, but he knew his other brothers weren't completely heartless.

After checking the journal, the pages, and Claw's old pink ribbon one more time, he stepped out of the den and instantly spotted Rip talking and laughing with Bone and Rock while Tear watched them enviously. When Bone and Rock walked away to go do something else, Dingo quickly darted over to Rip, calling his name quietly and making the red dingo look up in surprise. Rip narrowed his eyes when Dingo paused in front of him. Before his brother could ask why he had called for him, Dingo lowered his voice and murmured, "Can we talk somewhere private?"

Rip blinked and rolled his eyes in annoyance, but nodded anyway and allowed Dingo to lead him over to a quiet space away from the rest of the camp. "What do you want?" he muttered when they were alone, sounding bored.

"Did you give me the pages to Claw's journal back?" Dingo asked.

Rip blinked and froze before narrowing his eyes and growling, "Maybe. How'd you know that?"

"I guessed only Bone and his slave—I mean, friends," he quickly corrected himself, "knew where they were. Considering Rock's as bad as him, that left you."

"Did you tell anybody?" Rip demanded.

"No, of course not!" Dingo exclaimed. "I wouldn't dream of it."

Rip relaxed. "Good." He sighed, looking uncomfortable and embarrassed. "All right, so I brought your stupid papers back."

“Why?” he asked bluntly. Rip made it known every day that he disliked Dingo as much as Bone and the others and he always enjoyed taunting him with Bone and Rock. The fact that Rip would do anything nice for Dingo was amazing.

The silence that stretched out between them was very awkward and uncomfortable until Rip finally looked away and muttered, “You looked... pretty messed up the other day.” He paused, seeming even more uncomfortable and unhappy as he said, “You looked like you were really suffering and you *do* have a pretty rough life, I guess. I mean, if I were you, I don’t think I’d be able to take it so...” He trailed off with an awkward expression. “I guess I just figured we should ease up on the taunts just a bit.”

Dingo blinked, realizing with surprise that he felt kind of happy. At least Rip cared about him a little bit. “Thanks, Rip.”

Rip just shrugged, still looking out of place. “There’s a fine line between being harsh and causing someone to lose it like you did. I might not like you too much, but we’re still brothers. I guess I just thought that maybe if you got your stupid papers back, you’d feel better. I mean, it’s not like any of us can even read them, so you can have them.”

“Thank you,” Dingo whispered. For a moment, he felt weak with happiness that one of his brothers actually cared enough to do something nice. Rip didn’t exactly like him, but at least he cared enough to help him.

“Don’t mention it,” Rip replied. “And I mean that. *Don’t* mention it.”

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t dare,” Dingo told him.

“Good.” Rip glanced over his shoulder at Bone and Rock before turning back to Dingo and growling, “Oh, and another thing. Be careful in the Hunt and don’t get attached to the forest food. Hide out in your secret den or something when it starts.”

“I might do that,” Dingo agreed. “And thanks for caring, Rip.”

“Yeah well...this is getting a little awkward, so if you’re okay, I think I’ll go.”

“I’m okay.”

“Good.” Rip gave him one last glance before bounding off toward Bone and Rock and quickly joining in the conversation as if nothing had happened.

Dingo let out a long sigh, feeling a little happier and more in control. Maybe he really could hang in there for a little longer just to keep his promise. Maybe he would find something that could make life worthwhile. He just had to keep trying and that was what he intended to do even though the future looked bleak. If for nothing else, then for Claw.



# Chapter Twelve

## Living Nightmare

Broken candlelight flickered in the darkness, casting eerie light against the shadowy wall and illuminating Saderia's dusty orange fur. Her dull amber gaze flicked to the dying candle as the light of the fire danced before her eyes. Slowly she turned to Dash as the candle cast light on his dirty, matted fur and unkempt mane. She let out a sigh when the candle suddenly died away with a sharp hiss, plunging the room into darkness. Trying to ignore the violent growling of her stomach, she rubbed it falteringly with an itchy paw. Saderia longed to turn on a light to brighten the room and somehow brighten the mood, as well, but the lights had stopped working long ago. She also wished she could at least wash her fur, but the water was no longer running either and going outside to find a clean stream was asking for death. Besides, there were no such things as clean streams anymore.

Her gaze flicked to the boarded up window on the shadowed end of her room before she abruptly looked away, feeling almost grateful that the boards were there. Though they blocked the light of the sun and the moon, they also blocked her view of the forest. After all that had happened, that was a good thing. She didn't want to see what the forest had turned into. She didn't want to have to wake up every morning to see a scarred ground littered with fallen trees or dirty lakes and rivers dirty with gunpowder.

After three weeks had passed since the forest animals refused to leave, the hunters had invaded the rest of the forest, bringing with them a destruction she had never seen before. No one was brave enough to leave their homes for fear of the hunters' weapons and no one was vigilant enough to try to sneak through the woods for fear of traps the hunters had set. Wincing and stroking her hurt paw, she tried not to recall the pain she had felt when she had found her paw snared by one of the strange metal traps the hunters had hidden in the forest. It was only thanks to Dash that the trap hadn't crushed her paw or that she hadn't been left for the hunters to find.

Leaving her home was her only hope. Waking up in a different forest could never be worse than waking up in fear.

With a long sigh, Saderia leaned forward and relit the candle, blinking against the sudden orange light of the flame. As the wax dripped slowly onto the brown bedside table, she leaned forward and grabbed a tiny piece of paper. Dash peered cautiously over her shoulder as she stared at a tiny map of the forest, her narrowed amber eyes scanning the marked patches of woods, neighborhoods, and towns. She stopped when her gaze fell on the farthest, unmarked eastern edge of the forest.

Karenisha and Makero had already decided that if they were able to leave the forest, they were going to start traveling east. According to Karenisha, the west and south ends of the forest were surrounded by nothing but water and no one had ever managed to travel far enough north to reach anything other than wild, untamed forest. If she was right, their best bet would be to travel east since no one had yet tried that route and every other direction led to nothing but dead ends and more walking.

Saderia's gaze darkened as she studied the map and her eyes narrowed when they scanned the colored parts of the otherwise black and white paper. She remembered hearing Makero explain to her just two weeks ago that he and her mother would start marking places hunters had invaded with a deep shade of crimson; the blood red patches now covered almost the entire map.

Saderia looked up and found her gaze drawn to the shuttered window once more as she tried to picture what she might find on the east end of the forest. She opened her mouth to ask Dash what he thought when a sudden thunderous *Crack!* echoed through the forest, rocking the house and sending the candle crashing to the ground. As the flame died out and the house went silent, a screech of pain erupted from outside, raising all the fur along her back. She whirled around and found Dash's wide amber eyes glowing through that darkness.

"It's close!" he exclaimed as he leapt to the ground. His eyes darted wildly around the shadowed room. "It's too close!"

Saderia leapt to her paws, pricking her ears. She opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak, she froze. Her blood ran cold when a loud scream split the air.

***"Cia!"***

Saderia's eyes widened in horror and her heart suddenly skipped a beat. "Cia?" she gasped. "What...?!"

"Karenisha!" Dash shouted as he darted forward. His amber eyes gleamed with terror as he threw open the door and darted down the hallway. "Cia!"

Saderia raced after him, her paws thudding against the wood floor in time with her heart as the door slammed against the wall behind her. She looked up ahead when a thunderous roar echoed through the house.

"What are they doing so close?!" Makero boomed.

Saderia looked up frantically as she darted forward. Her eyes widened in shock when she skidded to a halt at the edge of the hallway and peered into the front room beside Dash, her only light emanating from the dozens of flickering candles scattered around the room. Her heart stopped as she stared into the center of the front room where three shivering tigers sat hunched over near the door. The light of the nearby candles cast grotesque, distorted patterns across their matted fur.

Saderia's mouth gaped open as she took in the scene, feeling fear and sickness rise in her throat when her eyes flicked to the ground and she noticed a deep red puddle spreading out across the wooden floor.

"Mom?" she gasped.

Karenisha turned to face her with eyes full of fear, her candle-illuminated face gaunt and pale. Saderia stared back at her in shock. A gasp escaped her throat when her gaze drifted to the panting animal lying on the floor in front of Karenisha, Makero, and Uncle Jash.

Her eyes widened in horror. "C-Cia," she choked out.

Cia painfully looked up at the sound of her name, her blue eyes wide with fear and pain as heavy pants shuddered out of her chest. Her paws trembled as she desperately tried to stop the flow of blood from a deep wound in her stomach. She jerked back violently when her paw brushed her stomach, letting out a loud shriek of pain that echoed through the dark house. Saderia winced as Uncle Jash rushed toward her aunt. His eyes were wide with fear and alarm as he struggled to calm her.

"It's okay, Cia," he whispered, his voice shaking with distress. "You're alive. We'll take care of you. We won't let you die."

Cia let out a strangled shriek of pain when Karenisha leaned forward and gently touched the bloody wound. Her blue eyes squeezed shut as she

squirmed away from her sister. “Make it stop!” she pleaded.

“We’re trying, Cia,” Karenisha whispered, struggling to keep her paws from trembling.

“Be strong,” Uncle Jash choked out as Saderia and Dash slowly crept closer, hardly daring to breathe. “You’ll be okay,” her uncle gasped. “Just let us help you!”

“What happened?” Dash stammered, his voice quivering with fear.

“A hunter,” Makero growled as Karenisha turned and raced off into the hallway to find something to help. “A bullet grazed her belly.”

Tingles of fear shivered down Saderia’s spine. “Will she live?” she whispered.

Cia let out a loud screech of pain when Uncle Jash tried to get closer to her.

Makero looked back sharply as Saderia’s uncle leapt away. His blue eyes were wide with terror and alarm as he whispered urgent apologies to his sobbing wife, his entire body trembling with fear.

“It’s not fatal.” Saderia whirled around as her mother rushed back into the room, carrying towels, gauze, and anything else that might help. “It just skimmed her stomach,” she added desperately, as if trying to convince herself.

“It hurts!” Cia screamed.

“Hold her still,” Karenisha commanded, ignoring Cia’s feeble protests as she darted toward her sister and crouched down to inspect the wound.

With shaking paws, Saderia’s uncle silently stepped forward and held his wife tightly in place. He winced when her shrill protests filled the air. Without a word, Makero bounded forward and secured her paws so that she couldn’t fight and make it worse. Trying to ignore the shivers racing down her spine, Saderia slowly stepped forward. She tried to swallow the sickness that rose in her throat when she stared down at the raw wound and the nauseating scent of blood grew stronger.

“Dash, help me clean the wound,” Karenisha commanded as she bent closer to Cia’s belly to inspect the injury. “We’ve got to stop the blood flow.”

Looking sick, Dash slowly stumbled forward and hollowly grabbed the towel Karenisha had brought. With eyes full of fear and dismay, he

slowly crept forward and pressed the towel to Cia's belly, only to jump back when she let out a loud shriek of pain. Immediately, Saderia reached forward and grabbed Dash's paw, squeezing it roughly as violent shivers raced through her body. Dash's shaking paw tightened on hers as they stared at Cia, their hearts beating wildly in their chests.

Wincing, Saderia looked away when Karenisha leaned down and began to clean the wound herself, drawing another loud shriek out of Cia's throat. "Stop!" she pleaded as she thrashed violently under Uncle Jash, Makero, and Saderia's paws. "Please stop!"

"Someone help me," Karenisha snapped as she ignored her sister's cries. "I need someone to lift her up while I wrap her belly with gauze."

As Karenisha worked to wipe away the rapidly flowing blood with the already drenched towel, Dash shakily stepped forward. At Karenisha's command, he leaned forward and lifted Cia up just enough for Karenisha to slide the gauze underneath her. He winced and closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to block out his aunt's screams. He held her still as Karenisha briskly began to wrap the gauze around her, occasionally pausing to wipe away the blood. Cia struggled in the arms of her family members and shrieks tore out of her throat. After what felt like years, Karenisha finally managed to wrap the gauze tightly around Cia's body and stepped back, allowing Dash to carefully lower her back to the ground.

Saderia cautiously stepped away from her aunt when Cia let out a muted whimper. Saderia's body trembled with horror as she pressed closer to Dash and wrapped her shaking tail around his. Karenisha let out a long, shaky breath as she stepped away from Cia, trying silently to stop her paws from shaking.

A splotch of red slowly spread across the gauze as Cia let out a soft gasp. She let her head drop to the ground, her eyes narrowing to slits before they closed entirely.

Saderia let out a gasp and leapt forward. "Is she..."

"She's not dead," Makero murmured, placing his paw gently on her shoulder to calm her down. "She's just unconscious."

Saderia heard Uncle Jash heave a sigh of relief as he turned to face his wife. He blinked rapidly as if to try to recover. "Will...will she be okay?"

“Yes,” Karenisha said firmly as she glanced around at them. “We’ll just have to watch her. We’ll stay here with her tonight since it’s too much of a risk to try to move her. We’ll have to keep switching out the bandages until the blood stops flowing completely. After that, she’ll just have to rest and avoid moving as much as possible to avoid upsetting the wound. Eventually the wound will heal and she will be fine.”

Saderia let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good,” she murmured as she silently began to slow the frantic beating of her heart.

Karenisha nodded absently. “Makerō,” she murmured, “go get a pillow to put under Cia’s head and a blanket to keep her warm. We’ll all stay by her side tonight.”

While Makerō nodded and darted off toward the left hallway, Karenisha turned to Saderia and Dash and let out a sad sigh when she saw their scared, haunted expressions.

“Wipe your paw with this,” she murmured, grabbing a towel and padding toward Dash. Dash let out a long, shaky sigh to try to calm himself as Karenisha carefully wiped the blood off of his paw. “Thank you,” she whispered. “She...she was out gathering berries for us to eat when it happened. Neither of you are to leave this house. Ever.”

“We won’t,” Saderia whispered.

“Good.” Her mother let out a long sigh. “In that case, get back to your rooms and get some sleep. Your father and I will look after Cia with your uncle.”

“Okay,” Saderia stammered. “C-call us if anything happens.”

“We will,” Karenisha murmured. Her tail gave a sharp, fearful twitch as she turned back to her sister, her dull orange fur shivering with sorrow and defeat.

Saderia exchanged a fearful glance with Dash before the two turned around and began stumbling back to their room, casting nervous glances back in their aunt’s direction. As the darkness of the hallway swallowed up the candle-lit image of her family, Saderia turned around and let out a calming sigh when she and Dash padded into her room.

Letting the door click shut behind them, the two carefully turned and climbed onto the bed where they sat in silence. Cia’s screams rang in her ears, sending shivers down Saderia’s spine. She struggled to push the images of her bleeding aunt out of head, but she soon realized that no

matter how much she tried to ignore it, the thought still haunted the back of her mind. Wincing, she struggled to focus on something else, anything else, as the darkness closed in on her.

The silence increased as two pairs of amber eyes stared out into the bleak nothingness around them. Slowly their shock began to die away and they slumped back against the bed, their eyes wide and sightless. After what felt like ages, Saderia finally murmured, "I think the hunters go to sleep at night like us since there's almost always less noise at night. They're mostly here in the afternoon."

Dash glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "I...I guess you're right," he murmured softly. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Saderia speculated for a moment. "We have to get the kingdom to leave, but we can't hold a normal meeting because the animals wouldn't dare leave their homes and travel through the forest with the hunters around. But maybe if we go to each individual neighborhood to talk to them, either at night or really early in the morning when there's less hunters, we could tell them what our plan is."

"But they would still have to travel through the forest when we leave it," Dash replied.

"I know, but we still have to tell them. Whether they come with us or not is up to them. If they have any desire to live, they'll at least consider it and hopefully they'll decide to follow us. All we have to do is choose a place for them all to meet if we do leave."

"But there's a lot of neighborhoods to get to, some farther away than others."

"True, but we should be able to figure out how long it will take to get to each neighborhood using the map and then time it right so we can get to as many as possible before the hunters wake up. If we figure out how long it will take to get to each neighborhood, we can give them an exact time, day and place to meet us when we're all ready to leave. We'll tell them to bring what food they have left and whatever else they want to take with them and to travel in very small groups so that they can hide easily. Once we've spoken to all the neighborhoods, we'll all meet, form a group, and leave together. We could even split up to go to each neighborhood and get it done faster; we could go together and Mom and Dad could go together."

Dash nodded thoughtfully. "It's a good idea and it might work...but Karenisha and Makero will never let us go alone. Especially after what just happened to Cia." He shivered at the thought.

"But we're smaller," Saderia protested. "We could hide easier." She sighed. "Never mind. You're probably right, but at least Mom and Dad will be able to use this plan." She didn't voice her fear of them going out alone; it didn't need to be spoken.

"They'll be careful," Dash said unconvincingly, as if reading her thoughts. "They have to be."

"Maybe." Her amber eyes flicked downward. "I guess we should get some sleep like Mom said."

"Yeah, I suppose," he murmured. "It...it will probably be better in the morning."

Saderia managed a weak smile before she slowly laid down and pulled the blanket up to her chest. "Maybe it will," she whispered as she closed her eyes, pulled the blanket over her head, and fell into a dark, restless sleep beside her closest friend.

Pain shot up her aching legs as her sore paws fell heavily against the ground, her eyes narrowed and unfocused. As she looked up at what lay ahead of her, a sharp gasp escaped her throat. Her heart skipped in her chest when she found herself staring out at a bleak, open expanse of pale white, blurry land. Blinking rapidly, she whirled around to look behind her and let out a frightened gasp when she saw nothing but blackness in place of what used to be her forest home. Her eyes widened in terror as the blackness slowly slithered toward her, threatening to tug her back in.

Whirling around frantically, she let out a gasp when she saw something green rise up above the endless, barren land, seeming almost to glitter in the invisible sunlight. Its sparkling green color seemed to reach out toward her from far away, the only color in the black and white world. Her eyes darted downward to the pale land below her before peering back at the blackness reaching toward her. With a cry of desperation, she bounded forward onto the barren, white land, never noticing the dark patches of red her paws left behind her.

Her paws thudded roughly against the hard, gritty ground as she raced toward the glittering green forest. She almost never blinked as she



bounded forward, her wild, desperate eyes never leaving the trees. Her heart skipped and she let out a cry of alarm when the forest seemed only to get farther and farther away. “No, wait!” she screamed as the bright gleam of the forest began to dull and its sparkling green promise began to fade behind the barren land. Saderia let out a cry as she darted after it, only to stumble forward with a shriek of fear when the once white land around her turned a dangerous shade of black.

Skidding to a halt, she whirled around and stared back at the way she had come. Her eyes widened in alarm when she noticed bloody red paw prints leading straight toward her. A vision of a black and white map flashed before her eyes. Red meant doomed. Whirling around frantically, she found herself staring into nothing but blackness in all directions. She let out a cry of fear when a low growl echoed from deep within the darkness. Her fur prickling with fear, Saderia whipped around when another snarl sounded from another direction. Blood red paw prints spattered across the black ground as she turned in circles, trying desperately to pinpoint the direction of the snarling.

A loud growl erupted from behind her. Saderia whirled around and let out a scream as a dark shadow lunged toward her. As she stumbled backward, a loud howl split the air and before she could feel the pain of claws or fangs, she found herself stumbling forward and collapsing to the ground in a land of nothing but complete darkness. Staggering fearfully to her paws, she searched desperately for a light. Her eyes widened as the darkness slowly began to recede and she let out a gasp of shock when soft words echoed in her ears.

“Run! The pack is vicious! I’ll come back! I’ll help you! I’ll make sure you live!”

Saderia’s eyes flew open and she jerked upward in the darkness of the night, her amber eyes wide with fear and shock. Terror shot up her spine as her Dream flashed through her mind and she whirled around, expecting to see blood red paw prints. She let out a sigh of relief when she saw nothing but solid wall. Her gaze flicked to the sleeping figure beside her as she struggled to calm the frantic beating of her heart. She managed a weak smile when she made out the silhouette of her best friend.

The smile slipped off her face as the Dream came rushing back to her, causing shivers of dread and confusion to race up her spine. Shaking her head, she forced it out of her mind, knowing it was hopeless to try to understand when she had much bigger problems than a nightmare. Nonetheless, the eerie Dream continued to nag at the back of her mind as she shoved the blanket aside and carefully dropped down onto the cold floor below.

Trying to push the thoughts away, Saderia padded silently toward the door, casting one glance back at her friend before quietly opening the door and shutting it behind her. Her paws brushed silently against the floor as she slipped down the hallway, her eyes flicking cautiously back and forth. She stopped at the end of the hallway and glanced out into the unlit front room, feeling a tingle of surprise when she saw her mother sitting just a few paces away. Her orange fur seemed somehow illuminated in the silver light of the moon.

“Mom?” she whispered.

Karenisha blinked and whirled around, her paws scraping loudly against the floor. Her tense expression relaxed when she noticed Saderia standing just a few paces away. “Saderia...” she murmured, her voice sounding tired and distant. “What are you doing up?”

“I had a Dream,” she admitted. “I don’t get it, but...we have to leave the forest now.”

“I know,” Karenisha murmured. “But how?”

Saderia paused. “Dash and I were talking before we went to sleep,” she murmured. “We were thinking that we could go to each individual neighborhood at night when the hunters sleep to convince them to leave.” She paused then began to explain her plan more carefully, stopping only when she had finished to try to read her mother’s expression.

Karenisha nodded thoughtfully. “It could work. Do me a favor and go get the map from your room, so I can try to figure something out.”

“Sure.” Saderia gave her mother a quick nod before turning around and striding back toward her room. When she carefully nosed the door open, she let out a muted gasp when she was met by Dash. After jumping back, she let out a sigh of relief when she realized it was only him.

“Saderia,” he murmured. “Sorry, I didn’t know it was you. Where were you?”

He stepped aside to let her pad into the room, his amber eyes narrowed with curiosity. "I was talking to Mom," she replied as she padded blindly toward her bedside table and felt around for the map. Wincing, she couldn't help but remember the black and white world and the red splotches from her Dream when she touched the black and white paper. Shaking it off, Saderia turned around to face Dash with an anxious expression he thankfully couldn't see. "She asked me to get this map so we can figure out which neighborhoods we should go to and if our plan will work.

Dash nodded seriously. "Do you think we'll do that tonight?"

"We'll see," Saderia murmured as she padded down the hallway, leading Dash with her tail.

When they reached the moonlit front room, Karenisha hadn't moved at all; the prick of her ears as Saderia and Dash padded closer to her was the only indication she wasn't simply a regal statue.

"Here's the map, Mom," Saderia murmured, sliding the paper toward her as her mother turned to face her.

Karenisha's paw brushed the map as she pulled it closer, her amber eyes narrowing and focusing on the red-spotted paper. "Dash," she whispered, "go get Makero and Jash while I look this over. Tell them it's urgent."

"Sure, Karenisha," Dash replied as he darted off toward the left hallway to wake his adopted father and uncle.

Saderia's gaze followed him down the hallway until he disappeared into the darkness. After a moment, she turned slowly back to face her mother. "Do you think this will work?" she whispered.

Karenisha nodded. "Yes. I think it will take us about a week to get to every neighborhood if we're really quick. You're right about night being the safest time, so we'll have to tell the forest animals to meet us one week from now at midnight. Makero and I will try to be quick when we go to each neighborhood while you two stay here with Jash to look after Cia."

"I'm not staying behind," Saderia said firmly, meeting her mother's stern gaze. "The three of us can get it done much quicker."

Karenisha narrowed her eyes, but before she could reply, she was interrupted by the tired voice of Makero.

"Staying behind?" he called as he padded behind Dash. "Who's going where?"

“What’s going on?” Uncle Jash echoed as he trailed slowly behind Makero.

“We’ve decided we’re going to go to each neighborhood at night to convince them to leave the forest,” Karenisha explained.

“And I’ve decided that I’m going, too,” Saderia spoke up.

“No,” Karenisha growled. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous for you, too,” Saderia retorted. “Look, I’m worried about you and Dad, too, but I know you have to go and so do I. It’s for the good of the forest and I have to do everything I can to help. Besides, it’s safer at night and I’m smaller than you both, so I can hide more easily.”

“No, it’s still dangerous no matter what time you go and what size you are,” Karenisha growled. “I won’t allow it.”

“If I go, we can get it done much quicker and you know it,” Saderia replied fiercely. “The forest is dying, Mom. The sooner we get this done, the better. I don’t want to let you and Dad endanger yourselves anymore than you want Dash and I to do the same, but we have to. We have to put the forest before ourselves if we have any chance of surviving and getting out of this place.”

Karenisha bit her lip and glared at her daughter.

Silence spread out across the room. After what seemed like ages, Makero finally looked up. “We might as well let her go, Karenisha. You know she’s going to anyway. Jash can’t stop her when we’re gone and neither could we even if we had the chance.”

Karenisha let out a sigh. “Fine,” she muttered. “You may go. But only if you take Dash with you.”

Her gaze flicked to Dash as the dark lion nodded seriously. “Of course I’ll go, Karenisha. I’ll protect her with my life.”

The Queen managed a weak, fond smile at her adopted son before she turned back to the map. “All right,” she whispered. “Saderia and Dash, you two will go to two neighborhoods tonight while your father and I do the same. Jash, you stay here to watch Cia while we’re gone.”

Saderia glanced at the map as Uncle Jash let out a relieved sigh, her amber eyes gleaming with hope and determination.

“Can we go to the Home of the Leopards?” she asked as she leaned forward and placed her paw on the map. She felt a shiver run up her spine when she brushed her paw across the words marking the familiar leopard

clearing and realized the entire neighborhood and almost all of the woods around it were marked with a dark, deadly shade of red. “The hunters will be asleep there, too,” Saderia added when she saw her mother’s narrowed amber eyes. “Just because the hunters started there doesn’t mean it’s more dangerous. We’ll be careful.”

Karenisha studied her for a long moment before letting out a long, slow sigh. “Fine,” she muttered. “Just watch out for any sign of hunters and don’t get into anything too dangerous.”

“We won’t,” Saderia promised.

“Good.” Karenisha heaved a weary sigh and glanced out at the gleaming silver moon. “In that case, we had better get going. And while we’re gone I want everyone to remember to keep themselves safe above all else. It’s not just your family who depends on you.” Her amber eyes gleamed in the darkness. “If something happens to any one of us, the forest is doomed.”

Saderia swallowed nervously and gave a meek nod, avoiding her mother’s fiery gaze and glancing past her into the dark world outside. As she fell into step behind her mother, she couldn’t help but wince when her Dream flashed through her mind. Shaking her head, she let out a sigh when her paws brushed the cold, dewy grass below. As the woods opened up around her, blasting her furry face with a rush of cold air, she couldn’t help but look back and feel a shiver of dread as she left the safety of her home behind. She looked down and spotted faded hints of her paw prints pressed into the grassy earth, making a shiver race down her spine. Her Dream flashed before her eyes.

Red meant doomed.

Her heart skipping in her chest, Saderia let out a shaky breath as she wondered if she really was following a path to catastrophe. And if so, was it better that she was unable to see it or worse?

Broken bits of glass littered the wild grasses of the dense, overgrown clearing as Saderia carefully picked her way through the town. Her paws made a soft brushing sound as they pressed against the tall grass, making her wince when the tiny sound seemed loud in the silence of the woods around them. She looked up as she moved deeper into town, feeling a slight shiver when she left the woodsy dirt path behind. Swallowing hard,

she looked around wildly at the wide, open clearing. Her eyes narrowed when she glanced out at the shadowed woods around them, fearing a hidden enemy.

Instinctively, Saderia found herself crouching closer to the ground, struggling to hide in the shadows of the grass that had sprung up around town. Her amber eyes glittered with fear and nervousness as she exchanged a long glance with Dash. Her ears twitched and listened intently for any dangerous sound.

As she crept forward, her gaze cautiously swept the abandoned shops. She couldn't help but feel a tingle of sorrow and fear as she stared out at the stores she had grown up with. Sharp, brutal cracks lined the broken windows and if she looked closely enough, she could see debris lining the once colorful shelves inside. The doors of once friendly shops were gaping open, just barely hanging onto dirty hinges. Saderia couldn't see a single useful supply inside the store that hadn't been salvaged or taken by other animals. With a shiver, she turned away from the shops that had once been such friendly, familiar havens. If she peered into the shadows past the shattered windows and hanging doors, the only thing she could picture was an enemy hiding inside, watching her every move.

Darting toward the broken sign marking the path that led to the Home of the Leopards, Saderia was only briefly relieved to be out of the open. As she crept along the wild, dirty path that led to the leopards' neighborhood, she found her eyes darting wildly back and forth to scan the woods around her for a malevolent gaze or the gleam of a claw. Gnarled trees branches reached toward her, interlocking and creating a eerie pattern above her that reminded her of a cage.

Anxious to break out of the enclosing woods and get somewhere safe, Saderia bounded forward as quickly as she could, being careful not to make a sound. Dash darted after her, his amber eyes flicking rapidly back and forth as he struggled to keep up with her. As the trees began to thin out, Saderia moved faster, stopping only when the woods opened up into the wide clearing she recognized as the Home of the Leopards.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Saderia glanced around at all the houses. Her eyes narrowed with unease when she saw the thick layers of boards covering the windows and even some of the doors. She padded anxiously forward, glancing around at the woods around her and the thick canopy

overhead. Silvery patches of light shone through the leafy canopy in tiny bright slivers, dappling her fur when she padded into the center of the neighborhood. Her ears pricked to detect any kind of sound, but the clearing around her was silent.

“We should talk to Maeta.” Saderia jumped at the sound of Dash’s voice and whirled around to face him. His amber eyes darted anxiously back and forth before returning to her face. “She’ll be able to get the others out of hiding long enough to listen to us and she can help us convince them to leave.”

“Right,” Saderia murmured, her amber gaze drifting toward the small den on the edge of the clearing. Wincing, she darted forward, trying to shake away the terrifying images of Hateko’s desperate green stare when she remembered recovering in Maeta’s home.

Dash quickly followed her as she raced toward the chipped door. After a brief hesitation and an anxious glance at the still woods around her, Saderia carefully lifted her paw and knocked on the door. She winced when the sound seemed to boom in the eerie silence. Flattening her ears, Saderia glanced nervously out at the forest. Her heart sped up when the stillness lasted and the door didn’t open.

“Maeta,” she hissed, daring to knock one more time. “Maeta!”

An overwhelming rush of relief washed over her when the door finally creaked open and a familiar spotted face peeked out through the crack.

Maeta’s brown eyes widened in surprise when she recognized them. “Saderia?” she hissed. “Dash?”

“Maeta,” Saderia whispered, “we know it’s late, but we have to talk to you. My parents have decided to leave the forest and it’s now our job to go around to every neighborhood to tell the kingdom where to meet when we leave. We’ve decided it’s best if we all meet up and leave together.”

Maeta nodded darkly. “I knew this time would come. Give me a moment to bring all the leopards out of hiding so you can tell them what’s going on. You two wait by the door and try not to make a lot of noise.”

“Okay,” Saderia hissed as Maeta briskly turned and padded toward the den closest to hers.

Saderia watched silently as Maeta knocked softly on the door and called something to the animal inside. When Maeta stalked away to call

more animals out of hiding, the door slowly began to open and a dull, wary leopard poked his head out to look around. His gaze swung around to meet Saderia's. Their eyes locked before Saderia looked away, unwilling to meet his frightened stare.

A soft murmuring reached her ears as leopards cautiously began to leave their homes and gather in the center of the clearing. Saderia looked up and tried to swallow a tinge of fear when she saw the increasing number of leopards crowded in front of her. Their gaunt, dirty faces stared back at her, their eyes wide with fear.

Trying to avoid the frightened gazes of the leopards in front of her, Saderia found herself searching the crowd for familiar faces and letting out a sigh when she recognized Loki just a few paces away. The cheetah leopard slowly looked up at her with wide green eyes as she trudged toward the crowd, her spotted tail twitching nervously back and forth. She managed a weak smile as she pressed closer to the large cheetah guiding her; Saderia guessed he must be her father. As Loki, her mother and father, and her two brothers carefully sat down in the clearing to listen, Saderia flicked her gaze to the other side of the clearing where a small, frightened leopard carefully stepped forward. Recognizing her gray blue eyes, Saderia winced when she read the fear in Lisa's troubled gaze and looked away.

Dash's tail gently wrapped around hers, forcing her to look up as he gave her a tight, reassuring smile. Managing to smile back, Saderia took a deep breath and faced the weary crowd. When all of the leopards had finally gathered in the center of the clearing, Maeta bounded forward to stand beside Saderia.

"Princess Saderia and Prince Dash have something to tell you," she announced, gesturing with her tail for Saderia to begin speaking.

After taking another deep breath, Saderia stepped forward, being careful to erase any signs of fear from her voice. "The time has come for us to leave this forest behind," she began. "I'm sure all of you have realized how awful it is to live like this with no light, no water, and no food. All of you must realize that leaving is now our only option."

She paused and scanned the crowd anxiously, searching for any sign of approval and letting out a muted sigh of relief when all of the leopards began nodding slowly, casting looks of relief toward their neighbors. Flicking Dash with her tail, she signaled for him to step forward.



Nervously Dash crept toward her and raised his voice just enough for all the leopards to hear. "One week from now at midnight, all of us will meet on the east end of the forest to set off for a new home. If you all agree to come with us, bring whatever food and supplies you have left that you can carry." He paused. "Does...everyone agree?"

Saderia held her breath and watched as every leopard in the clearing slowly began to nod their approval, their dull, tired eyes filled with the tiniest bit of hope.

"If that's it then I can take over here," Maeta spoke up. "All of you may return to your homes. Princess Saderia and Prince Dash will work out the rest of the details with me so that I can lead you to the eastern end of the forest when the kingdom is ready to leave."

Murmuring softly, the leopards slowly began melting back toward their homes, casting apprehensive gazes at the woods as they locked their doors behind them. Saderia caught Loki's eye and smiled weakly before her friend was herded away by her leopard brothers. Loki smiled back and waved slightly just as she was pulled into the house and a heavy lock clicked in place.

Sighing, Saderia turned around as Maeta began padding toward her home, flicking her tail in indication for Saderia and Dash to follow.

"Come here," she called. "I've got a map inside my den. You can show me exactly where to meet when the time comes. I'll prepare the rest of the leopards so that you two can get to other neighborhoods to spread the word."

Saderia let out a smile. "Thanks, Maeta." Her tail swished uneasily back and forth as she followed the leopard leader into her home and waited as calmly as possible for her to retrieve the map.

A second later, Maeta returned and spread the map out in front of them, waiting for their guidance. Pointing to the place where the forest animals would meet, Saderia felt an instinctual jolt of fear when she recognized the red warning patches on the map that marked where the most danger was. She managed to smile at Maeta when the leopard thanked her for her help, but as she turned and began walking toward the edge of the clearing, her Dream suddenly flickered before her eyes.

As she padded down the dirt trail, she couldn't help but look back and wonder once again if she was leading the way to her own doom and if

she was leading the forest animals in her own scarlet footsteps.

# Chapter Thirteen

## First Steps

Moonlight shimmered down on the dark, silent forest below, casting silvery light out across the still woods. Eerie shadows draped the wild, grassy earth, throwing strange, twisting patterns across the dewy green blades. Dying flowers ducked their moonlit stems behind huge, stoic trees, hiding in the ominous shadows shrouding the woods around them. Black branches stretched out across the woodsy clearing, reaching out with gnarled arms as if to snare any passers-by. Wide, determined eyes gleamed in the darkness, their deep amber depths turned silver with the glowing reflection of the full moon.

Instinctively, Saderia reached forward and squeezed the small, bulky book bag laying beside her. An image of the regal, ancient scroll detailing the royal family tree flashed before her mind and she winced as she pictured such a majestic artifact crammed inside a dirty box. Her paw carefully brushed over a sharp edge in the book bag and her eyes narrowed as she pictured the tiny box where the scroll was folded up next to her mother's old diary. Looking up at the moon, she wished she could take the ancient scroll in Queen Tarae's tomb with her, but she knew that entering the tomb was disrespectful unless it was an emergency. The prophetic scroll would stay in its home.

Clouds slowly drifted over the moon, plunging the grayish land below into darkness as Saderia dragged her paw away from the book bag. It was kind of fitting. The scroll from the dungeon in her home—the scroll that listed the royal family lineage—would be going with them to their new home, while Queen Tarae's scroll—the one that gave an animal the power of Dreams—would stay behind. The dungeon scroll would be used to detail new lines of royalty in their new home while Tarae's scroll would become just a memory. In the same way, Saderia and the kingdom would be able to start a new life in a new forest with new families and new homes while their history was left behind.

“Saderia?”

Saderia pricked her ears and turned at the sound of Dash’s voice. Her amber eyes narrowed when she saw him standing in the doorway.

Dash blinked several times before stepping forward, brushing his unruly mane out of his face and sitting down beside her. “What are you doing out here?” he whispered, resting his tail on her back. “Don’t you want to stay inside? We’ve still got a few minutes left before...” He trailed off with a long sigh.

Saderia took a deep breath and let it out slowly as she turned her gaze back to the stars. “I’ve already said my goodbyes to our home, Dash. It’s better for me to wait out here and prepare than stay back there and pretend it’s not happening. If I don’t see what I’m leaving behind, I can better see what I’m going to find.”

“But you still see the forest,” Dash replied softly. “You’re going to miss that the most, aren’t you?”

Saderia didn’t reply. For a moment, the two sat in silence until she finally murmured, “Are Mom and Dad up?” When Dash nodded, she added, “How’s Cia?”

“She says she’s fine,” Dash replied softly. “Karenisha says she’ll be able to travel so long as we keep an eye on her.”

Saderia sighed. “Good.” Her gaze traveled slowly to the moon as the clouds began to fade away. “I guess it’s time to go then.”

Dash glanced at his paws. “I guess.”

A soft bang from behind them made them jump and whirl around as Karenisha and Makero cautiously stepped out of the house. Their eyes widened in surprise when they saw Saderia and Dash.

“You two are ready to go?” Karenisha hissed.

With a sad sigh, Saderia nodded. “Yes. Is it time?”

“Yes, it is,” Makero sighed as he padded closer to them, his green eyes both determined and uneasy. He turned when he reached Saderia and Dash and watched as Cia carefully crept after them, her blue eyes narrowed with fear. Uncle Jash padded right beside her and leaned forward to let her lean on him with a blue gaze full of fear. Saderia leaned forward, ready to help her aunt in case she fell, but thankfully her uncle was able to hold her up.

Uncle Jash looked up at the four of them as he stepped out onto the grass, shivering from the cold air around them. "Are you sure we have to leave now? Cia..."

"I'll be fine," Cia interrupted. "Let's go. It's dangerous out here and I don't want the same thing happening to anyone else."

"Cia's right," Karenisha murmured. "Let's get going. We only have a few hours to get to the east end of the forest where we'll meet with the kingdom. If we're late, the forest animals will be even more worried than they already are."

Uncle Jash let out a sigh. "All right. Lead the way."

Karenisha took a deep breath. "Is everyone ready?"

Saderia wrapped her tail around Dash's and slowly nodded her head along with everyone else.

The Queen glanced around at them and let out a long sigh. "All right. Then let's get moving. Remember to be quiet and stay low to the ground. We can't afford to be seen now."

Saderia merely nodded as she fell into step behind her, squeezing Dash's tail with her own and letting their fur brush together. Her ears pricked up as Cia and Uncle Jash cautiously began to follow them, their paws rustling against the grass below. Cold dirt brushed her cracked pads as she stepped onto the familiar dirt path. Her gaze remained trained on the ground and she forcefully narrowed her eyes, trying not to think of all the times she had walked along this very path to go to town, to go to school, to meet friends... It was just a path, but would there ever be a path that held the same memories for her?

Patches of moonlight spotted the trail as the six of them padded onward, being careful not to make a sound. Saderia's eyes flickered to the trees rising up on either side of the path and her gaze lingered on the dark leaves. She wondered if the trees in her new home would look the same. Forcing herself to look ahead, she continued walking as moonlight dappled the dark grass around her.

Only when she reached the very end of the path did she finally give in and look back at her home for the last time. When she saw nothing but an obscured, indistinguishable den sitting among fallen trees and shadowy woods miles away, she remembered why she hadn't wanted to look back.

Memories were too easily tainted.

Anxious murmuring reached her ears as Saderia paced deeper into the forest beside her family. Her ears twitched and her gaze instinctively raked the murky depths of the thick woods around her to make sure the whispers hadn't brought any unwanted attention. As she padded deeper into the forest, trying not to wince when her sore paw pads scraped against a thorn, the voices gradually became louder. Ducking under a low, thorn-laden branch, Saderia soon found herself standing on the edge of a wide clearing she had never seen before with dozens of forest animals spread out in front of her.

"We should have left earlier," Karenisha muttered as she darted forward, raising her voice to call the animals to attention and let them know the royal family had arrived.

Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash rushed after her to ease the kingdom's worries while Saderia and Dash remained standing on the very edge of the clearing. Their amber eyes scanned the dense, dark woods surrounding the clearing and their tails squeezed each other for comfort. Without thinking, Saderia lifted a paw to tear a few sharp thorns out of her side and winced when she remembered the thorny bushes she had had to creep around on her journey. After she and her family had padded into the familiar town, her parents had led her not onto a familiar trail but into dense woods. As the hours passed by, the woods began to get thicker and thicker until they had been forced to break apart from each other just to get around large trees and clinging undergrowth. After a while, Saderia had begun to realize that she no longer recognized the woods around her and had only been able to hope her parents knew where they were going.

Her gaze raked the clearing, pausing on the wild, tickling grasses that reached well up past her belly and the myriad of branches radiating off of almost every tree. Looking around at the untamed clearing, Saderia began to wonder if this was the first time anyone had set foot this far east in the forest. No one had any clue what was beyond this point or even that this clearing existed; the black and white map didn't even mark it. Everything past a certain point that she had passed several miles ago was nothing but uncharted forest. Almost anything could be ahead of her now. The eastern end of her forest was an unsolved mystery—one of the few she was reluctant to solve.

“Do you recognize anybody?”

Saderia looked up as Dash’s voice interrupted her thoughts and found the dark brown lion gazing out at the crowd. “Like Loki or Lisa?” he added, catching her gaze.

Blinking, Saderia carefully turned her gaze to the frightened crowd and winced when she read the fear and loss in their eyes. Their tense murmuring had died down to nothing but a few quiet whispers, but even the soft reassurance of a neighbor was not enough to keep them calm. Every animal couldn’t help but glance out at the dark woods around them. Their eyes were full of terror as they searched for the hidden enemy. Saderia swallowed nervously when her own gaze flicked to the woods; she silently wished the animals would lower their voices. A group of their size was anything but inconspicuous. If the enemy found them, she doubted there would be many—or even any—left alive.

Her amber eyes widened when she caught sight of a familiar spotted face and her heart leapt with hope and relief. “Loki,” she breathed, catching Dash’s attention. “She’s over there.”

“So she made it here okay.” Dash let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good news.”

Saderia nodded silently and her ears perked up when she met Loki’s green gaze.

Almost instantly, the cheetah let out a cry of relief and raced toward them at her highest speed, stopping just a few inches away from them. “Saderia!” she gasped. “Dash! You’re safe!” She managed a weak, sheepish smile as she faced them. “I was worried a hunter might have found you.”

Saderia smiled. “We’re safe. I’m glad to see you made it here in one piece, too. You and your family are all right, aren’t you?”

“And Lisa’s fine, too, right?” Dash added.

Loki shrugged uncomfortably. “Yeah, my family and I are fine. But Lisa...”

“Lisa’s hurt?” Saderia gasped.

“No, she’s not hurt,” Loki said quickly. “She’s just...worried.”

Relaxing only slightly, Saderia whispered, “About what?”

Loki opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak a word, a sharp call cut through the clearing.

“Loki! Get back here!”

“That’s my brother,” she murmured sheepishly. Before Saderia could ask again, she hissed, “Lisa’s fine, Saderia. If you really want to know what’s bothering her...go see Lizzie over by the lions and lionesses. When you find her, I think you’ll understand.” Saderia’s eyes widened with distress and confusion as Loki angled her ears back in the direction of the crowd. “Don’t worry about Lizzie or Lisa; they’ll both be okay in time. Right now, I’ve got to get back before my parents get worried. Good luck.” She gave them a tight smile before slowly turning and trudging reluctantly back toward the group of whispering forest animals.

After exchanging a nervous glance with Dash, the two bounded toward the rapidly growing crowd, smiling weak smiles as shaky animals crept out of the woods and began to fill the outer edges of the clearing. Her gaze caught on the creamy yellow fur of a group of lionesses. Rushing forward, she skidded to a halt in front of them and faced the startled lionesses with worried amber eyes.

“Do any of you know where I can find a lioness named Lizzie?” she blurted out.

One of the lioness’s expressions darkened with sadness. She lifted her yellowish tail and pointed off toward the opposite edge of the clearing. “She’s over there with her family, Princess Saderia.”

“Thanks,” she murmured as she raced past them in the direction the lioness had pointed out.

Saderia and Dash looked up and ran faster when they spotted a familiar lioness laying on the ground with her head between her paws, her creamy yellow body just barely visible through the tall grasses.

“Lizzie!” Saderia called. She and Dash skidded to an abrupt halt just a few paces away from the lioness and glanced down at her curiously.

Saderia watched as Lizzie’s ears pricked up and the lioness slowly lifted her head to look at them. Her pale green eyes widened in surprise. “Saderia?” she gasped. “Dash?”

“Lizzie?” Saderia murmured as she crept closer to the lioness, carefully inspecting her old schoolyard enemy to see what Loki had been worried about. She paused and drew back with a sharp gasp when she suddenly spotted a dark, red scar lining her side. Her eyes widened in shock. “What...what happened?” she exclaimed.



Lizzie sighed and glanced at the scar, her green eyes tired and sad. "Hunters," she murmured. "They shot at me, but missed."

"A hunter shot at you?" Saderia gasped. "That's...awful! Are...are you going to be okay?"

Lizzie shrugged. "I guess. I can walk at least. My Mom said the scar will heal eventually." She paused then let out another painful sigh. "My tail, on the other hand..." Before Saderia could ask, Lizzie slowly lifted her tail into view to show what was left of it.

Saderia let out a gasp as she stared at Lizzie's tail, her eyes widening in horror. The lioness's once long tail ended at a little more than half the length it used to be in a furless stump crusted with dried blood. She slapped a paw over her mouth to keep herself from saying anything and accidentally hurting the lioness's feelings. After a moment of silence, she finally whispered, "What happened to...to your tail?"

Lizzie glanced at the ground. "It got stuck in one of those metal trap things the hunters set out. I tried to call for help, but one of the hunters heard me and found me. I had to yank my tail out of that trap to get free and I managed to run away right as the hunter shot at me and gave me this." She pointed to the scarlet scar with an almost unnoticeable shudder. "It only grazed my side and the hunter didn't kill me...but it got my tail. Or at least half of it."

"That's horrible," Saderia whispered. "I'm so sorry, Lizzie."

Lizzie just shrugged bleakly. "I'll get over it, I guess. It happened a while ago anyway. The scar starts bleeding sometimes, but other than that, I can kind of ignore it... I just wish I had my tail back."

Saderia paused. "Your tail will heal, Lizzie. When it does, it'll look fine. It might not be what you're used to, but you'll still look nice."

Lizzie just sighed. "Maybe."

Saderia opened her mouth to try to cheer her up, but before she could speak, she was interrupted by a soft gasp.

She looked up and paused when she saw Lisa and Lily standing just a few paces away, their blue eyes wide with shock. "Lizzie?" Lily gasped. "What...what happened to you?" She paused then gestured helplessly to Lisa with her black paw. "L-Lisa told me something happened to you, but..." She trailed off with a look of horror and dismay.

Lizzie glanced up at them and let out a long breath. “Hi, Lisa,” she murmured. “Hi, Lily.”

“Lizzie...” Lisa whispered. “You...you’re going to be okay, right? I’m so sorry I was so mean to you and ditched you to go play with Loki! I didn’t want this to happen! Please tell me you’re going to be okay!”

Lizzie flicked her ears with an almost normal roll of her eyes. “Calm down, Lisa,” she muttered. “I’m not dying! And I’m past caring if you hang out with Loki or not. Play with who you want.”

Lisa paused, her gray blue eyes flashing with relief as she smiled a grateful smile. “Th-thanks, Lizzie,” she whispered. “I hope you get better.”

“Yeah, me too,” Lizzie murmured. “It doesn’t hurt that bad, Lisa, so you can stop worrying.” She paused then turned slowly to Saderia and Dash, managing a weak smile when she saw their worried faces. “Enough with the looks. You hate me, remember? Now go back to your parents. You’ve got to get us out of this place.”

Saderia paused then managed to smile weakly back. “O-okay, Lizzie. Be careful. I hope you feel better soon.”

“Thanks,” she replied, giving them a slight smile as they turned and slowly began padding away.

Once the lioness had disappeared behind a group of animals, Saderia let out a long sigh. “Poor Lizzie,” she murmured. “I hope she’s not too upset.”

“She’ll be okay,” Dash muttered absently. “At least she’s alive.”

“You’re right,” Saderia replied. “At least Lizzie, Lily, and Lisa are all safe. I’m sure they’ll all be okay once we manage to get to a new forest and away from these hunters.”

“Yeah,” Dash sighed. “I’m glad we saw her. At least we’re not leaving her behind.”

Saderia blinked and turned to study his suddenly far-away expression. She rested her tail sympathetically on his shoulders. “Are you thinking about Lolista?” she whispered.

Dash shivered and shrugged. “Sorry, I just... Lizzie’s a lioness and I guess she just kind of reminded me of her. I just can’t help but wonder if something like this has happened to her and what’ll happen to her now that we’re leaving her behind. I mean...nobody deserves that kind of fate. Not even her.”

Saderia sighed, but before she could try to comfort her friend, she was startled by a soft, familiar voice from behind them.

She and Dash whirled around as Karenisha came pacing toward them, her amber eyes dark and regretful. "I'm sorry, Dash," she murmured, stopping in front of them. "I did all I could to find her."

Dash blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

"Lolista," she explained. "I looked for her when I went to some of the other neighborhoods this week, but I couldn't find her. I'm sorry."

Dash gaped at her in shock. "You actually looked for her?"

Karenisha nodded. "Lolista might be a little...unbalanced, but she doesn't deserve to die like this. Besides, it was for you."

Dash stared at her, stunned. "Th-thank you," he stammered, his amber eyes round with surprise. "I...I can't believe you looked for her..."

Karenisha just shrugged. "It doesn't matter now, I guess. I was just going around to see if everyone's here and the last few have finally showed up. We're going to leave in just a few minutes." She paused. "Are you two ready?"

Saderia hesitated then nodded slowly. "Yeah," she murmured, brushing her paw over Dash's and squeezing it lightly. "We're ready."

"Then come with me," Karenisha replied as she pushed herself to her paws and began marching toward the front of the clearing where Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash were waiting. After a quick, nervous glance, Saderia and Dash quickly followed after her, their tails streaming out behind them.

"Listen up." Makero's voice boomed out across the clearing as loud as he dared, causing the animals to quiet almost instantly. Saderia sat down close to Dash and stared out at the forest animals with wide eyes as Makero continued, "It is time to leave. I want everyone to stick as close to their friends and family as possible so as to have someone to look after you and to look after. I don't want anyone going this alone." He paused as the forest animals shifted anxiously toward others before announcing, "We've decided we're going to split up into three groups led by Queen Karenisha, Cia and Jash, and myself. Don't worry; we won't split up families. We also won't stray too far away from each other. The point of splitting into groups is merely to make the task of leading you easier. Whoever is in Karenisha's

group will be her responsibility, as will the animals in Cia and Jash's group be their responsibility and the animals in my own group be mine."

He paused as the animals slowly nodded, cautiously warming up to the idea. After a brief hesitation, the King raised his voice and began dividing the animals into each of the three groups, requesting that they walk over to the animal leading them when their name was called. Saderia watched with a tiny tingle of relief when Loki and her family, as well as Lisa and her family began padding toward Makero to be in his group. The two families were quickly followed by Maeta and her pregnant sister, Marlina. Saderia tried to avoid the shaky brown gaze of Marlina and forced herself not to think about her husband, Hateko, or the cruel fate she had witnessed. Saderia looked up only when she felt the soft brush of her father's tail on her shoulder.

Makero's green eyes bored into hers. "You two will come with me," he murmured seriously, nodding at her and Dash.

Saderia managed a weak smile. "Okay."

Makero gave her a calming glance before turning back to the crowd and roaring, "Let's get moving!"

Almost at once, the forest animals stepped forward. Their paws thudded against the grassy ground in unison as Karenisha, Makero, Cia, and Uncle Jash began leading them through the dark trees surrounding the clearing. Saderia took a deep breath as she and her kingdom were swallowed up in the shadows of the thick woods around them. She tried to ignore the memories—of her home, her bedroom, the dirt path, the town, her school—as they flashed through her head, knowing that dwelling on them would only bring her pain. Struggling to ignore a sharp sense of loss, she forced herself to face forward and keep her head high as she marched onward. She couldn't afford to show any pain because now that she had a kingdom to lead, she wasn't just Saderia; she was their Princess, their guiding light.

Letting out a sigh, she allowed her determined amber gaze to rake across the dark, twisting branches above her, shivering when she realized they blocked out the light of the moon. Looking down, she glanced from side to side, examining the wide trees and searching for any sign of an attack. Stumbling over thick, unnoticeable tree roots and wincing when she heard the sharp crunch of leaves under paw, Saderia struggled not to give

into her fear. She tried not to wince even when a particularly sturdy root struck the paw that had been injured by the tree and caused it to begin throbbing with pain.

Hours passed by as the forest animals fought to navigate their way through the wild, uncharted woods littered with painful briars, thorny vines, thick grasses, wide trees, and clinging branches that scratched their bodies and smacked against their faces. As the moon rose higher in the sky, Saderia began to realize that the trees were finally beginning to thin out. Frowning, she glanced down and noticed that the grass was becoming slightly lower and less tangled. As she moved onward, her gaze raked the woods around her and her eyes widened when she noticed the bushes and trees slowly begin to thin out. She glanced down with anxious eyes when the grass gradually grew sparse, their small, bristly stalks more of a brownish color than bright green.

Saderia peered anxiously through the trees. Her heart began to beat faster as she struggled to see what lay beyond her forest. It skipped a beat when she thought she was able to make out a strange, light brown color through the trees. Quickening her pace and ignoring the throbbing of her hurt paw, she bounded along the soft ground, squinting desperately to try to see what was ahead. As the trees slowly grew sparse, Saderia burst through a thick patch of undergrowth and found herself standing between a large, leafy tree and a thick, thorny bush. Moonlight shimmered down on her face as she stared out at the land in front of her. Her eyes widened in shock when she found herself gazing out at an empty, treeless landscape.

A sharp gasp escaped her throat and her heart stopped in her chest as she stared out at the barren land. Just a few feet in front of her the grass thinned out until it disappeared entirely into an endless ocean of light brown sand. The thick, bushy undergrowth disappeared into infinite dunes of yellow brown dirt. No trees or plants broke the monotony of the sand; not a single thing stood between the lifeless, gritty land and the moonlit black sky above.

Sharp gasps broke out behind her as she darted forward. Her heart raced as her paws pressed into the warm, gritty sand. Her eyes widened in shock as she slowly raised her paw to her face and watched the sand spill off her broken pads. Her mind whirled, as if unable to believe what she was seeing was real.

She looked up sharply at the sound of paw steps behind her and saw Makero step up beside her, his green eyes wide with surprise and disbelief. In an instant, Dash bounded up behind him and took his place beside her, his amber eyes round with dismay.

“How...how is this possible?” he gasped as he stared out at the barren land. “We go from lush forest to this?!”

Saderia spared a stunned glance at her best friend before turning to her father, her eyes widening in unease. “D-Dad?” she stammered. “Are we actually going to try to cross this?”

Makero turned to her sharply then cautiously turned to face Karenisha, who was standing just a few feet away. Her eyes met his as a mixture of unspoken words passed between them. With a slow, shaky sigh, Makero turned around to face the dark forest behind them. His green eyes narrowed when he peered into its deep shadowy depths. Saderia glanced back and shivered when she faced the foreboding woods. The thought of going back in there to face the hunters and walk for hours—maybe even days—to find another way to go seemed unbearable. But to lead the forest into such a barren, lifeless place as this...?

“We can’t turn back now.”

Saderia looked up in shock as her father’s strong words pierced through her thoughts.

“There’s too much to lose,” the King continued. “We can’t go back into a forest riddled with hunters, traps, and who knows what other kinds of dangers. It’s almost morning anyway. The hunters will be awake by the time we even get back to the clearing where we met. We can’t risk going back when there’s so much danger.”

Dash looked up at him in shock. “So we’re going to have to try to get through this place? It seems like it never ends!”

“It has to end somewhere,” Makero growled, “just like our forest has.” He paused then turned cautiously toward Saderia. “What do you think, Saderia?”

Saderia hesitated as she stared out at the endless expanse of sand and dunes, her mind whirling with fear and unease. Her Dream flashed before her mind and she turned around to face the forest and the animals, feeling an unexpected pang of fear when she faced the shadows in the woods she had left behind. Slowly she turned around to face the lifeless

land once again with eyes full of fear and uncertainty. Her heart beat wildly in her chest as she struggled to make a decision.

"I...I think we should go," she whispered into the silence of the night, feeling hollow as she stared out into the sand. She wondered if she had made the right choice.

Makero nodded. "All right," he murmured. He turned and raised his voice. "All right, let's get moving! We've got a lot of ground to cover before morning! Keep close to your families and your groups and don't look back. We have to keep going!"

The forest animals exchanged anxious glances before cautiously stepping toward the royal family, their eyes betraying their fear and unease. Saderia turned around as her kingdom stepped up behind her, her heart hammering in her chest. Her eyes were round with fear as she faced the unknown. After a quick glance between her father and Dash, she slowly took a deep breath and reluctantly crept forward, feeling her paws sink into the gritty sand below.

A sharp tingle of fear raced up her spine as she took her first steps into the wide, endless desert. The first steps of what she knew would be a long journey.

The first steps into the very place she had seen in her Dreams.

Dingo pricked his ears when excited howling erupted from the front of the camp. Anxiety made his paws feel as heavy as stone as he padded to the entrance of his den to look out into the dingo camp. He narrowed his eyes when he saw Bone waiting with growing anticipation at the camp entrance. His amber eyes glittered with impatience as he waited for Rip and Tear to return from their trip to the edge of the forest. The rest of the pack watched the entrance closely as Rip and Tear burst into camp, their yellow eyes glowing excitedly.

"The forest food have left the forest!" Rip announced. "They're in the desert!"

As the pack cheered, Bone licked his lips with a cold sneer. "Good," he growled. He paused just long enough for Dingo's heart to skip and then freeze entirely when his brother's next words echoed around the camp.

"The Hunt has finally begun!"

# Chapter Fourteen

## The Journey

Hot, blistering sunlight beat down on the sandy earth below, scorching the backs of the forest animals as they trekked miserably through the sweltering desert. Heads hung low, trying to avoid the blinding yellow light of the sun as sore, heavy paws sunk deep into the sand. Occasionally, a rough, grating cough sounded from somewhere in the back of the large group, but no one paid too much attention. Salty tears glimmered on Saderia's eyes as she blinked rapidly, trying desperately to force the stinging sand out from under her eyelids. A hoarse cough shuddered out of her raw throat as she stared listlessly ahead, longing for just a tiny drop of water to soothe the pain.

Her injured paw throbbed as she struggled to keep moving. Her mind was blank with exhaustion and hunger. Her stomach rumbled loudly in the silence of the heated desert and a sharp twinge of pain stabbed her belly when she thought about food. She tried not to think about how many hours she had been walking and how many she might have left.

The forest had disappeared behind her a long time ago. When she struggled to focus through the haze of tiredness and heat exhaustion, she winced when she remembered the sharp pain of loss she had felt when she had looked back and realized she could no longer see the treetops. After so many hours had passed by, however, her sorrow had slowly died away in wake of more pressing problems. The fact that her home had disappeared behind her wasn't the problem. The fact that the only thing she could see for miles was nothing but more and more sand was the problem. Saderia's amber eyes scanned the whitish blue horizon, searching desperately for any kind of end, but she could see nothing. She heaved a sigh as her head drooped once more and she blindly forced herself to keep plodding onward.

Immeasurable amounts of time dragged by slowly. Every few hours, Saderia found herself peering hopelessly up at the sky and feeling a mixture of relief and dismay when she realized that the sun was creeping closer to the horizon but at a pace that could rival the slowness of a snail. All she



wanted was to lie down to rest her aching paws and exhausted mind. Sleeping was the only thing that could possibly relieve her of the grating pain in her throat and the sting of sand in her eyes.

Slowly the sun faded closer to the horizon, casting dark orange rays of light out over the sand dunes. As night fell over the silent desert, cloaking the once sunny sky in a blanket of pure darkness, Saderia felt her eyes slip shut. Glancing up at her father, she silently pleaded for a break, but the King didn't seem to notice her or stop to rest. Sighing, Saderia stared at her paws and kept moving as the air around her grew slightly cooler. Only when stars began twinkling in the sky did Makero finally pad to a tired stop.

"It's time for a break," he announced as he turned to face his group. "Everyone take out the pack you brought and have something to eat before you go to sleep."

With a sigh of relief, Saderia collapsed to the ground, feeling her dusty head sink into the sand. Her limbs seemed to go numb when she finally let them relax against the cool desert floor. She glanced up as Dash sunk to the ground beside her, letting out a sigh when his mane fell over his face.

Pulling her head up off the ground, she quickly turned around to look back as the group of animals slowly sunk to the ground, letting out their own sighs and groans. A soft, rustling noise filled the air as they reached for the food in their packs. Saderia's gaze trailed over their dirty, dusty fur and gaunt stomachs and she felt a tinge of sadness when she saw how tired they were. Trying to ignore the exhaustion and fear she could read in the eyes of the forest animals, she turned to look up at her father when he heaved a sigh.

"I have to make sure everyone's rationing their food," he muttered when he caught her eye. His voice cracked with dryness.

Dash quickly lifted his head. "I can do that," he offered. With a slight groan, he raised himself to his paws, shaking the sand off of him and facing the King. "You stay here and get some rest."

Makero hesitated. "Do you know how much each animal should have?" When Dash nodded, the King let out a long sigh and murmured, "All right, Dash. Thank you."

Dash gave him a tight smile before padding off into the group of tired animals and leaning down to check their food. His tail twitched anxiously back and forth as he made his way through the crowd, glancing over shoulders and occasionally smiling when someone gave him a weak thanks. Saderia let out a sigh and turned away from the weary forest animals to stare out at the horizon.

Her eyes narrowed as she studied the miles and miles of sand, wishing she could see her mother. When they had first left the forest many, many hours ago, Makero's group and Karenisha's group had been barely a few feet apart. Over time, they had spread out to cover more ground and see more places to be sure they weren't passing up another home in their journey. Though she knew it was important for her family members to be able to see more places and guide their groups, she wished her mother didn't have to be so far away in such a strange, foreign place.

She glanced up at the sound of her father's voice to find Makero staring at her with a mixture of sadness and pride. His dull green eyes were calm as he murmured, "Have something to eat, Saderia. You've been walking a long time and you need to keep your strength up."

With a sigh, she slowly reached out and grabbed her yellow pack before unzipping it and rummaging around inside for something to eat. After inspecting an apple and cutting off a slice with her claw, she silently began chewing on it, trying to make the tiny ration last. Her tired amber gaze wandered to the desert around her as she bit into the apple slice. She couldn't help but wonder how long the desert would go on and if their tiny rations would last until they made it out of there. The sound of a soft familiar voice interrupted her dark thoughts, causing her to turn around and smile a weak smile when she noticed Dash standing beside a familiar cheetah and leopard several feet away.

She watched as Loki and Lisa let out a happy laugh and began eating their rations beside Dash. They smiled and waved goodbye when Dash padded away from them to finish checking the others' rations, their spotted tails waving contentedly back and forth. Saderia smiled, but her gaze darkened as she watched her lion friend pad over to two other leopards. Recognizing Maeta and Marlina, Saderia let out a sigh when she read the sorrow in Marlina's dull brown eyes. Trying to ignore the leopard's

grief and the memory of her husband's demise, Saderia promptly turned away and studied the horizon.

Finishing off the last bits of her apple, she jumped when she felt a soft tail brush across her shoulders. Looking up, she managed to smile as Dash laid down beside her, his unkempt mane falling over his eyes.

"Exhausted?" he murmured, brushing the dark brown hair off of his face and giving her a tight smile.

She nodded, letting her head rest against the ground. "Yes. I wonder how much longer we have to go."

Dash let out a long sigh as he glanced out at the empty desert around them, his amber eyes clouded and worried. "I'm sure it can't take more than a few days. Maybe a week or two at most. I mean, it's not like it will just go on forever..."

"I hope so," Saderia murmured. She glanced back at the animals behind her and managed a slight smile when she saw some of them lay down to sleep next to their families, their eyes slipping shut as the moon shone down on them. "I suppose we should get some sleep, too," she whispered.

Dash shrugged. "I guess, but..." He glanced around anxiously before turning back to her with a hint of unease in his eyes. "Do you think someone should keep watch? I mean...this is our first night in this place. We don't know what's...out here."

Saderia swallowed nervously and turned to stare out at the desert around them. The place seemed so empty and lifeless...but what if there really was something out there?

She looked up when Makero gently rested his paw on hers. "I'll keep watch," he told her. "Just in case."

She frowned. "But you're exhausted."

"I'll help," Dash spoke up. "Makero can stay up half the night and I'll take the other half."

Saderia turned to him and narrowed her eyes. "But you're tired, too."

Dash just shrugged. "It doesn't matter, Saderia. I'll be fine." He glanced up at Makero. "Does that sound okay to you? I could take the first watch and wake you up after a couple of hours."

Makero hesitated then nodded. "Yes, I suppose that's a good idea. We both need our strength to lead the others. Saderia, you can keep watch tomorrow night," he added, seeing her about to protest. "But not tonight. You need your rest, especially because of your hurt paw. It would be better for you to lay down and relax rather than stay alert all night to keep watch."

Saderia paused then nodded bitterly. "All right, Dad. You two can keep watch."

Makero gave her a weak smile before slowly laying down and settling himself on the gritty desert floor, his tail curling up over his face to block the light of the moon. Dash laid his tail across Saderia's paws as she drew her legs in closer and tried to find a comfortable sleeping position. Trying to ignore the itchy sand below her, she sighed and laid back. She stared silently up at the sky before murmuring a soft goodnight to her father and best friend. Her heavy eyelids began to droop as two quiet goodnights echoed back and the moon blurred before her eyes. The last thing she saw before her eyes slipped shut and her world faded into blackness was the stars shining above her, the only things that hadn't changed no matter where she went.

The moon gleamed in the black sky, casting an eerie light out over the pale desert sand. Whispers and cold snickers echoed in her ears as she stared out at the empty desert. Her eyes widened with fear as she struggled to escape the cruel voices. Frozen in place, she could only watch as dark figures darted across the empty land, their shadowed tails streaming out behind them. Her mind whirled with fear and unease as she stared out at the horizon, waiting for something to happen.

A flash of amber eyes caught her eyes, forcing her to watch in silence as a stream of forest animals burst out from behind a sand dune, moving quickly in the darkness of the night. She longed to move to help, but she was forced to stay put as the shadowed shapes crept closer to them. Her eyes widened and a shriek tore out of her throat when the figures lunged at the forest animals, letting out loud howls and laughs as the forest animals let out screams of alarm. In an instant, the previously empty land erupted into a ferocious battle.

The smell of blood rose in the air as Saderia watched the scene unfold, unable to move or even say anything to stop it. Screams filled the

air as the forest animals struggled to fight back. Claws clashed in the eerie silver light of the moon. Animals collapsed to the ground with sharp yelps of pain as the large figures threw them down. Desert sand filled the air as animals struggled to run away from the violence, kicking dust up around them and blinding Saderia to the battle in front of her.

A loud, vicious snarl suddenly sounded over the loud shrieks and howls from the fight, making Saderia whirl around in fear. Her eyes widened in fear as a large, dark figure leapt over a sand dune and raced toward her, letting out a low, cruel laugh. Her paws shuffled frantically on the desert floor as she darted away. Her legs ached with pain when she pushed them to keep moving, desperate to escape. The screams from the fight slowly began to ebb away when she dove behind a sand dune. Whirling around, she let out a scream as the dark shadow lunged toward her.

“No!” A deafening howl split the air as her world plunged into blackness.

Before the claws of her attacker could pierce her skin, she felt herself yanked away as a desperate string of unspoken words raced through her mind, echoing as if shouted.

*Not them. Not her. Not again.*

Saderia’s eyes flew open and she stumbled frantically to her paws, her terrified amber gaze darting wildly back and forth across the desert land.

“Saderia?” She whirled around to see Dash staring back at her in surprise. “What’s the matter?”

“Is something wrong?” She whirled around at the sound of Makero’s voice to see her father staring back at her with worried green eyes, his orange fur dark in the blackness of the night.

Saderia opened her mouth to reply, but before she could utter a word, a sharp shriek pierced the air, raising the fur along her back and drawing gasps of shock and fear from the animals behind her. Makero whirled around to stare off into the desert with green eyes full of shock as Saderia’s eyes widened with fear.

A sharp gasp tore out of her throat as her Dream flashed through her mind and a raw sense of fear shivered down her spine. She turned wildly to

her father. “Mom is in danger!”

Dingo had tossed and turned in his den all night long, worrying about something that couldn't be prevented no matter how much he wanted it to be. Ever since Rip and Tear had announced that the forest food had left the forest, the whole pack had been more excited than usual, preparing to attack as soon as possible. Of course, Dingo wasn't invited, which he was somewhat grateful for.

Nonetheless, he couldn't stop worrying about the forest animals. He felt sick to his stomach when he imagined them padding out of the forest and seeing the desert, looking afraid and worried before the pack jumped out at them to kill them, like they had done to outcasts and everything else they didn't like. So many innocent lives...just taken away by the pack. More pain, more death... Would it never end?

He sighed. The pack was preparing to go after the forest animals at that very moment and he shuddered to think of what they might do to them. Lives would be lost and he wouldn't be able to do anything to help. Some of those deaths could be his fault, all because he was too scared of the pack to help them. But what exactly *could* he do? Nothing.

Slinking over to the entrance of his den, he looked out at the dingoes. Of course, Bone and Rock were part of the group that was going to attack the forest animals, but so were Rip, Tear, Sand, and many other dingoes. As predicted, Bone was in charge of leading the group, and Rock was doing everything he said, acting like he was Bone's Second in Command. That was the way they always did things. Bone ran the show and Rock supervised.

The dingoes who were going with Bone to attack looked excited while the ones who weren't going looked jealous. The dingoes were probably already dividing the forest food up: who got what and who wanted tigers or cheetahs or lions or whatever. So sick.

Dingo turned and put his head between his paws, but he could still hear the commanding voice of his psycho brother and the excited howls of the dingoes outside. Soon he heard the sound of their hurried paw steps fading off into the distance, heading away from camp and toward the poor, unsuspecting forest animals.

Dingo drew in a ragged breath, trying to stop the frantic beating of his heart. But try as he might, he couldn't stop seeing images in his mind of the forest animals being slaughtered by the pack. Of Rip and Tear cornering a lion. Of Rock tripping a fleeing leopard and killing it. Of Bone holding down a struggling tiger as he prepared to deliver the killing bite.

For some reason, that image lingered. Dingo tried to push it away, but the awful thought wouldn't disappear. He growled in annoyance then froze, feeling his blood run cold and his body become hollow. Because in his mind, it wasn't a tiger that Bone was about to kill, not anymore.

Now it was Claw.

"No," he growled, trying even more forcefully to get rid of the image and failing miserably. He couldn't bear to think about that; it would destroy him or at least what was left of him. But still, he couldn't help but wonder... It made no sense. Why would Bone do such an awful thing as kill Claw? Bone was a creep, but Claw was their sister. What could possibly have caused him to kill...?

Dingo blinked hard, fighting back tears. It couldn't have happened. After all, Claw had never hurt anybody or done anything bad. She couldn't possibly have done something to make Bone hate her enough to... She couldn't have; the perfect image of his perfect sister was something he couldn't afford to tamper with. Unless Bone had gone after her for no reason at all...

He was getting nowhere, and he didn't want to dig up the past; it was hard enough living in the present. But if he really loved Claw, shouldn't he try to find out what had happened to her and make it right? How could he ever do that? Obviously, he would have to question Bone somehow, but he couldn't even get a drink from the water trough without Bone hurting him and forcing him into submission. If he ever tried to question him about Claw, he would be torn apart. Not to mention, Bone had the whole pack on his side.

How could he ever stand up to Bone? Despite the fact that he would be killed if he ever tried, he couldn't imagine ever getting up the courage to stand up to his brother. Dingoes just didn't go against Bone, at least not seriously. It was one of those unspoken but well-known rules. Crossing him was asking for death.

Trying to push those thoughts away, he slipped out of his den when no one was looking and snuck away from camp. He didn't want to listen to the others and he didn't want them to see him. He wanted to be alone, maybe permanently. But as he was walking through the desert, he started thinking about the forest animals.

His paws itched to follow the dingoes who had gone to attack them and find some way to stop them and save the forest animals' lives, but he knew he could do nothing. He loathed himself for it.

Suppressing a shiver, he started running in the direction opposite the one the dingoes had taken to attack, trying not to think about it. But the guilty thoughts kept coming until he stopped, panting, thinking he was about to go mad. He almost gave in to the thoughts and turned around to try to help the forest animals. Almost. Somehow he managed to stay in place despite the guilt-ridden thoughts and not go running off in that direction.

He stopped and stood still for a moment, trying to get himself under control and wondering why he was getting so upset about the whole thing. It was horrible, but so was everything else that happened in the desert. He shrugged it off and had all but gotten himself completely under control when he heard a terrified cry of pain and alarm.

The minute he heard it, he bolted off in the direction of the forest without another thought. Like a moron. But it was as if he couldn't control himself anymore and he couldn't push away the horrible image of Bone pinning that tiger down...maybe the same way he had pinned Claw before he killed her.

He ran faster as another cry split the air; he was getting closer. Salty sickness rose in his throat as he thought of all the animals down there being attacked. Would they be able to fend for themselves and survive? He had no way of knowing and the thought haunted him as he kept running. More pain, more death... He winced; they *had* to survive.

Suddenly the sounds of fighting grew louder and he realized the fight must be happening just over the next sand dune. He swung his head around to look for any signs of the dingoes and felt his breath catch in his throat when he saw the dark streak of Bone racing toward something orange just a few feet away. The image of him killing the tiger, and Claw, flashed through his mind.



“No!” he howled as he raced forward. His heart beat faster as he darted after him, not really knowing what he would do when he confronted Bone, if he could actually do it. Suddenly he stopped; he couldn’t do it. He still couldn’t confront Bone—he’d die.

He froze at the horrible thought then let out a gasp when he found himself standing at the top of the sand dune, looking out on the fight taking place between the startled forest animals and the equally startled dingoes. Dingo felt his mouth open in surprise as hope stirred in his chest. There was an uncountable number of forest animals, more than the dingoes could handle with just the few they had sent out to attack. Maybe there was some hope left, after all. *The forest animals were winning!*

Gasps echoed around the dark desert as the forest animals jumped to their paws behind Saderia, their eyes darting rapidly across the horizon. Dash opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, a loud howl echoed through the desert. Saderia’s eyes widened in horror as the dry air grew suddenly thick with shrieks, screams, and dark, vicious snarls.

“What’s happening?” someone shouted.

Makero whirled around, his green eyes gleaming with alarm and determination in the dim light. “You,” he ordered, gesturing to a large group of forest animals. “Come with me! Something’s happening to Karenisha’s group. The rest of you stay here and keep watch!” He started to turn around as the group he had singled out began to creep nervously toward him. The King raced forward then paused and whirled around to give Saderia and Dash a long, dark stare.

“You two,” he growled. “Stay here. I don’t know what’s going on over there, but it’s way too dangerous.”

“They’re being attacked,” Saderia snapped.

“Even more reason,” Makero growled. He gave them one last stern glance before turning around and racing away. He signaled with his tail for a group of animals to follow him and shouted over his shoulder orders not to go *anywhere*.

The instant the King disappeared behind a sand dune, the remaining group of forest animals erupted into anxious whispering. Saderia whirled around to stare at them as older animals pulled their families closer to them, their eyes darting rapidly around to try to spot the enemy. Her eyes picked

out Loki standing close beside Maeta and her brothers, her tail lashing and her green eyes narrowed with determination as she prepared for a fight. Other animals silently readied themselves for an ambush as they glanced rapidly around, letting out low, anxious growls in case any attackers were around.

Saderia whirled around to see Dash staring at her, his eyes wide with alarm.

“Karenisha’s being attacked?” he gasped.

“I saw it in a Dream,” Saderia stammered. She winced when a sharp screech split the air.

“We can’t just stand here!” he shouted. “What if something happens to her?”

Saderia looked up to meet his horrified gaze. Whirling around, she stared at the terrified forest animals, her heart pounded rapidly in her chest. “You’re right,” she gasped as her Dream flashed before her mind and the images of forest animals being thrown to the ground filled her heart with terror. “Let’s go! *Now!*”

Tightening the straps of the pack around her shoulder and ignoring the stunned, blank gazes of the forest animals, she whirled around and darted off after her father, her black-striped tail streaming wildly behind her. Dash raced frantically after her, his short dark mane whipping across his face. Their paws slammed against the ground, leaving large dusty clouds of sand in their wake as the shrieks grew louder. Saderia’s heart pounded frantically in her chest and her fur bristled on her back. Her wide, unblinking eyes stared out at nothing but more sand dunes as she tried desperately to find her mother’s group. She winced when raw screams pounded against her eardrums.

The sickening tang of blood rose in the air as she leapt over the closest sand dune. Her eyes darted rapidly across the sandy landscape, her ears aching with the pain of the loud screams. A violent shiver racked her body as the yelps and snarls grew louder and the nauseating smell of blood began to make her feel sick.

“How far away are they?” Dash shouted, his voice just barely audible over the sounds of the fight.

“They can’t be too far!” Saderia called back. Her eyes locked on the closest sand dune when screams and howls erupted from behind it and she

forced herself to run faster, her paws smacking the ground. A terrible sense of danger washed over her as she drew closer, sending shivers of cold dread throughout her body. Her paws reached desperately for the sand dune, her muscles tensing to leap, when suddenly a sharp, horrified howl split the air.

“No!”

Skidding to a halt, Saderia whirled around in shock. Her body went numb with fear as her Dream raced through her mind. A sharp gasp tore out of her throat when she saw a dark figure leap over the top of the sand dune, his narrowed amber eyes glinting in the moonlight when he spotted them. Fear raced up Saderia’s spine as she slowly backed away.

“D-Dash,” she whispered.

Dash blinked and whirled around, letting out a gasp as a cruel sneer slowly spread across the dark brown figure’s long, scarred muzzle. Sharp fangs gleamed in the moonlight. The figure’s short, dark brown tail lashed excitedly back and forth as he let out a dark growl and lunged toward them. Saderia let out a cry of fear before whirling around and darting away with Dash right beside her, their tails streaming out behind them. The figure’s strong paws slammed against the ground and a loud, triumphant howl tore out of his chest as he chased after them.

Saderia’s paws thudded madly against the ground as she struggled to get away, her heart hammering wildly in her chest. Her eyes stretched wide with terror when she glanced back and saw the strange figure just a few feet away. Ignoring the dying screams and shrieks from the battle, she darted frantically through the gritty sand dunes, desperate to escape. Ragged pants shuddered out of her chest as she forced herself to move faster, trying not to notice the searing pain in her injured paw.

With a desperate cry, she dove behind a sand dune with Dash right beside her. Crouching down, she ran as fast as she could, shivering when she heard a low growl from somewhere behind her. Barely noticing the sudden quiet of the desert around her, Saderia struggled to keep moving, her eyes almost never blinking. Her head swung around and her wide eyes locked on Dash’s for what felt like an eternity before she looked away. Together, they raced through the desert until they collapsed on the ground, their sides heaving with heavy pants.

Saderia’s ears strained to hear any sign of an attack, but the air was still and silent, unbroken by the harsh sound of a growl or howl. Letting out

a long sigh, she buried her face into the sand below, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart and catch her breath. Her tail flicked soundlessly back and forth as she shuddered and relaxed, not seeming to notice the eerie quiet. Slowly she looked up at the sky, managing a weak sigh of relief when she realized she had gotten away before turning to Dash to make sure he was all right. Her eyes met those of her closest friend, but when she saw the fear in his eyes, she felt a tinge of confusion. It was only when Dash spoke that she noticed the sudden silence and realized why he seemed so afraid.

“Saderia...” he whispered. “...Where are we?”

# Chapter Fifteen

## Lost

Saderia looked up sharply and leapt to her paws. Her heart skipped a beat when she found herself staring out at nothing but empty desert all around her and realized she could no longer hear the sound of battle or any sound to tell her where her family was. Panic sent her heart pounding wildly as she whirled around, her paws shuffling rapidly against the gritty sand and sending light brown clouds of dust drifting in all directions. Her wide amber eyes rapidly scanned the horizon as she struggled to remember which way she had come. She felt numb when she realized that everything looked the same.

Orange light slowly began to shimmer on the horizon as Saderia struggled to stay calm. Swallowing a whimper of fear, she leapt to the top of a sand dune and looked out across the desert, feeling her hopes plummet when she saw nothing but the same sandy landscape with no hint of her family in sight. Her tail lashed anxiously back and forth and a shiver of fear crept up her spine.

“Saderia?”

Her ears pricked up. Feeling numb, she slowly turned around to see Dash staring at her, his amber eyes wide with alarm. “Do...do you know how to get back to Makero?”

A hint of yellow light began to spread across the sky as Saderia weakly turned away from him, refusing to answer.

“Saderia?” She tried to ignore the panic in her friend’s voice as Dash rose to his paws behind her. “Are we lost?” he demanded.

“No,” she said quickly. Her heart skipped a beat as the word seemed to echo around her. “We just...Just give me a minute. I have to think.”

“We are, aren’t we?” Dash exclaimed. His eyes widened as he bounded toward her. “That...*dog* chased us out here and now we don’t know how to get back! Nobody even saw which way we went, so Makero

can't find us when he realizes we're missing!" He shook his head frantically as he stared out at the desert. "What if Makero's not even alive?"

Saderia turned to him sharply. "Why wouldn't he be?" she demanded.

Dash turned to her desperately, his eyes wide with fear. "Didn't you hear the sounds from that fight, Saderia? We didn't see it, but didn't you hear what some of those dogs were saying?"

Saderia shook her head as a frown creased her face. "No," she said. "What?"

"I heard the growls of some of those dogs when we got closer to the fight. They were calling us...food and talking about how they'd *waited* for us to come here so they could hunt us down! Didn't you see that thing that chased us? It wanted to kill us!"

Trying to suppress a shiver of fear, Saderia turned darkly toward the horizon. "Whatever those things...dogs...were, Mom and Dad could handle it. They must have been able to fight them off; I'm sure of it."

Dash glanced at his paws. "Maybe you're right, but how are we going to get back? We're lost, Saderia, and you know it! If we weren't, we'd already be back with Makero! I don't know what direction we came from—everything looks the same!"

Closing her eyes, Saderia struggled desperately to think of something or remember which way led them back to their group. Her ears strained to hear something in the desert—the shrieks and screams of the battles, a call of her name, the snarl of the dog that had chased them, anything to indicate any hint of life—but the desert was silent. Opening her eyes wide, she whirled around to face the opposite direction, searching for any sign of paw prints to indicate the direction she and Dash had come from or some sort of landmark, but the desert was as empty as it was quiet. A thick layer of dust had already seemed to cover any signs of paw prints.

Remembering her Dream and the threatening dog that had chased them, she turned fearfully, wondering if it was out there somewhere, watching them. Her eyes widened when she realized that even the dark, menacing mutt seemed to have disappeared without a trace. Forcing herself to take deep breaths, she slowly turned around to take in the entire desert, feeling her hopes hit the ground when she realized that everything looked

exactly the sand—one sand dune after another. With nothing but endless sand in all directions, there was no hope of ever finding their way back.

“Saderia,” Dash whispered. “We can’t just stay here. What if those dogs are around? We...we have to do *something*!”

“Shh,” she hissed. “I’m thinking.”

Dash fell silent, though she could feel his amber gaze boring into her fur, desperate for answers. Closing her eyes, she struggled to listen to her instinct, hoping beyond hope that her special Dream sense could somehow point her in the right direction. Picturing her father, she let out a long, shuddering breath as she sought out a path that would lead her to safety. Ignoring the fear shivering down her spine and the terror she could picture in Dash’s penetrating amber gaze, she felt her heart leap in excitement when she felt a tug in a certain direction, as if her instinct was pulling her towards a safe path. Just as her eyes began to flutter open, she froze when another sharp tug seemed to pull her in another direction—one almost completely opposite of the first one.

A tingle of fear trickled into her heart as she felt herself pulled in both directions, feeling as if she was being used in a Dream-like game of tug of war. Shivers raced down her spine when she blindly faced each direction. She felt her heart speed up each time as though each path bore a clear and dangerous warning. Her eyes opened wide with fear, but the directions of the two different paths remained burned in her mind. Her father couldn’t be in two different directions; what exactly was going on?

Silently cursing her confusing Dream sense, she turned around when Dash murmured her name. Her heart pounded wildly with fear when she read the terror and desperation in his gaze.

“Saderia,” he whispered, “which way should we go?”

Looking in each direction carefully and seeing nothing but the same bleak landscape of dark sky and endless sand, Saderia let out a long, shaky sigh. Feeling her fur bristle when she peered in both directions, she struggled to find the less dangerous one, but each seemed to bear the same ominous threat: If she picked that path, she would be leaving something behind. Hissing in frustration, she struggled desperately to find the direction that would lead her to her father and felt her claws dig into the sand when her Dream sense refused to show her the way.

Glancing wildly in both directions, she felt her fur begin to prickle under Dash's worried gaze. Knowing she had to pick a path, she shook her head fiercely and finally turned blindly to face a random direction. "This way," she blurted out. "I...I think we should go this way." Her tail flicked nervously back and forth as she faced the path she had chosen and her heart pounded with unease as she wondered if it was the right one.

Dash glanced up at her in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Saderia said firmly, though she felt anything but sure of her decision. "We...we should go. The sooner we get moving, the sooner we'll be able to find Dad."

"I...I guess you're right," Dash stammered. "I guess...we should hurry up and get going if you really think this is the right way."

Saderia's scared amber eyes met his and held his gaze for what felt like ages before they slowly turned to face the direction she had chosen. Unconsciously tangling their tails together, they reluctantly took their first steps forward, hoping desperately that their family would be just beyond the next sand dune. Their eyes locked on the horizon as the first few rays of sun began to shine across the desert sand, driving away the last hints of darkness in the world around them.

A long sigh escaped Makero's throat as his heavy orange paws trudged through the sand. His ears pricked up at the sound of soft groans from behind him and he glanced back to see the animals shuffling tiredly after them. The King's dull green eyes raked over their bloody, scarred bodies and he winced when he saw the wounds the strange dogs had inflicted on the animals of his kingdom. Turning back around, he strived to remain confident. He was glad that none of the animals in his group had been killed in the fight and that Karenisha and every animal in her group was safe and alive. To reassure his group, he would have to remain optimistic.

Signaling for the animals behind him to rejoin the group and ignoring the curious whispers of the animals who had stayed behind, he silently searched the area for Saderia and Dash. Frowning, he turned to the large crowd when he couldn't find them. Pricking his ears as the forest animals rapidly began asking questions about the fight, he stepped closer to the crowd, scanning it silently for his children. Passing over the curious



gazes of the forest animals, he tried to pick out Saderia's bright orange fur and Dash's dark brown mane, but found nothing. Feeling a tingle of unease, he carefully pushed his way through the crowd, searching for the two familiar faces.

He paused when he heard a familiar voice and whirled around to find himself staring at a young cheetah.

"Loki!" he called. His eyes widened as he bounded toward the startled cheetah and the even more surprised leopard that stood beside her.

Loki looked up and blinked in surprise when Makero skidded to a halt in front of her. "Yes, King Makero?" she replied as she cautiously studied his expression. Beside her, the leopard's grayish blue eyes rapidly grew wider at being approached by the King.

"Have either of you seen Saderia and Dash?" he demanded.

Loki frowned. "No, I was too caught up with all that was going on to notice them. I thought they were over there..." She glanced helplessly at the spot Makero had left them; her tail twitched uneasily when she realized they weren't there. Turning to her leopard companion, she murmured, "Did you see them, Lisa?"

The tiny leopard slowly shook her head, seeming to shrink under Makero's intense stare. "I'm sorry," she stammered. "I...I haven't seen them either."

Letting out a long sigh and feeling a shiver of worry, Makero rapidly thanked them before turning around and darting off into the crowd.

"Have you seen my kids?" he demanded as he pushed past anxiously whispering panthers, lions, and leopards. His heart began to beat faster when every animal around him slowly began shaking their head. Bounding rapidly through the crowd, he searched the group of animals for any sign of Saderia and Dash before finally racing to the front of the group and letting out a loud, booming roar.

At once, every animal turned to him in alarm, their terrified whispering slowly dying away. "Has anybody seen Princess Saderia and Prince Dash?" he demanded.

His heart sank when nobody spoke up and the only movement in the still, silent desert was the quiet shaking of heads. Some of the forest animals began looking around the group, but as Makero's eyes raked over every animal in front of him, he realized that he could see no sign of his children

anywhere. Shaking his head as if in denial, he backed away and scorched the burning desert around him with his fiery green gaze, hoping to see the orange fur of his daughter just a few feet away. His hopes plummeted when he saw nothing but yellow brown sand in every direction.

“I...I think they went that way...”

Makero whirled around, his gaze burning into the fur of the animal who had spoken. “Which way?” he demanded. “When?”

The animal seemed to shiver under his burning green gaze. “I...I thought I saw them follow you when that fight started. They disappeared behind that sand dune over there right after you left.”

Makero’s eyes widened in horror as he whipped around to stare at the sand dune the animal had pointed at. His heart froze with alarm. Giving the animals one quick glance, he dove forward and leapt to the top of the sand dune, throwing back his head and shouting, “Saderia! Dash!” His eyes desperately searched the empty horizon as his hollow words echoed back to him. Shaking his head desperately, he looked frantically back and forth, his mind whirling with terror and disbelief. His ears perked up and his body went numb when cries of alarm broke out behind him.

“Is Princess Saderia missing?” someone gasped.

“Did one of those things take her?” another echoed.

Makero’s heart skipped a beat as he stared helplessly out at the desert, struggling to think through the panic clouding his mind. Feeling hopeless and confused, like a lost cub, he shakily turned around to face the forest animals. He could only stand there and stare as more cries broke out amongst the animals and a deep panic spread through the group like wildfire. Shaking his head furiously, he fought to clear his head, feeling his fur begin to bristle as the frightened whispers grew louder, drowning out his thoughts.

Raising his head, he let out a furious roar. “Quiet!” he bellowed. “Everybody stay calm so I can think!”

Immediately, the crowd fell silent and stared back at Makero with wide, scared eyes. The King lowered his head and stared at the ground. His paws shook with horror as he wondered about his children. Were they close by? Were they even alive? Had one of those dogs done something to them?

Looking up, his eyes locked on those of the animals all around him as their terrified, desperate stares bored into his fur. Knowing he couldn’t

force them to wait in one spot while he looked for his children—or worse, take them off course to look for them with him—he struggled to think of another option. Praying that his children were only a short distance away but somehow doubting it, he frantically searched the crowd. His troubled green eyes narrowed when they fell on the spotted orange fur of a familiar brown-eyed leopard.

“Maeta,” he called.

The leopard leader looked up in confusion, seeming surprised to have been summoned.

Makero rapidly bounded forward to take his place in front of the crowd of animals as Maeta stepped forward. “I have to look for Saderia and Dash and I need you to lead the forest animals,” he hissed, watching impatiently as Maeta’s eyes widened in surprise. “Keep going the way we were headed before and don’t wait for me. I’ll catch up to you later.”

Maeta hesitated for what seemed like ages before cautiously nodding. “Okay, King Makero. I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you,” Makero stammered. He gave the group one last, anxious glance before rapidly turning around and bounding toward the top of the sand dune.

Looking back one last time as the forest animals slowly began to follow Maeta, he let out a long sigh of apprehension. Turning around, he faced the desert as the sun slowly began to rise in the sky, casting its burning yellow light out across the sand. After taking a slow, deep breath, he padded uneasily over the sand dune, searching for any sign of Saderia and Dash and hoping the group wouldn’t leave him and his children too far behind. As the crowd of animals disappeared behind a sand dune, leaving him alone in the empty desert, he finally turned around and began racing off into the endless sand, determined to find his lost kids.

Darkness spread across the sky, sinking the sun closer to the horizon as Saderia and Dash padded tiredly through the desert. With a long sigh, Saderia stumbled forward and let herself collapse on the cool sand below, her tail drooping to the ground. Dirty brown fur brushed hers as Dash crumpled beside her. His amber eyes were dull as he gazed out at the empty desert around them. Dim stars began to twinkle in the night sky, casting mocking light onto the silent desert below.

Heaving a sigh, Saderia slowly looked out at the barren land around her, feeling her heart skip a beat. Hours had passed and she already knew she had picked the wrong path; what she didn't know was why her instinct would even point her in this direction if it didn't lead her to the safety of her father and his group. Her ears drooped as she stared at the ground. It didn't matter anyway. Now that she had already chosen a path, there was no sense turning back; it would only get her even more lost. The only thing she could do was hope that the direction she had chosen would somehow lead her to her loved ones.

Pulling the pack of food off of her shoulder, she silently began rummaging for a decent meal, trying to ignore her unease. Dash glanced at her out of the corner of his eye before quietly tugging at his pack and glancing around for something to eat.

Together, the two began to eat, their amber eyes drifting up toward the moon shining in the black sky.

"How far away do you think Makero is?" Dash murmured.

Saderia shook her head hopelessly. "I don't know, Dash."

Dash let out a sigh. "Are we going to have to spend the night here?"

Saderia glanced around before nervously turning back to her friend. "We've got no choice," she said. "We can't just avoid sleeping forever. We'll collapse."

Dash's amber eyes widened with fear. "We really have to try to sleep out here? In this huge desert? With those wild dogs roaming all over this place? ...Alone?"

"One of us will have to keep watch," she muttered.

Dash gave her a long, uneasy glance before slowly turning away. "I suppose," he murmured. He looked away as silence fell between them.

Staring up at the sky, the two remained quiet as they softly chewed their food, trying to make it last as long as they could. Their tails flicked restlessly from side to side, swishing the sand around them and making strange patterns across the gritty desert floor. Dash silently turned to stare at her, his amber eyes glowing with apprehension. After what felt like ages, his quiet voice finally broke the deadly silence.

"This desert was the bleak place you saw in your Dreams, wasn't it?" he murmured.

Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, Saderia sighed. “Yes,” she muttered. “I knew it was from the time we first saw it.”

Dash nodded quietly. “You had a lot of Dreams about it,” he added cautiously. “They might be able to give us some insight into what might happen here and we might be able to prepare ourselves for it if you can remember them all.” He paused. “*Can* you remember them?”

“Sort of,” Saderia muttered. She paused. “The one I remember the most is my most recent one—the one I had right before the fight broke out between Mom’s group and those dog things. In that Dream, I remember hearing some kind of howl and after that, I remember hearing someone yell ‘No!’ in real life just before that dark brown dog leapt at us.”

Dash frowned. “Do you think it was one of those dogs that said it?”

“Maybe,” she murmured. “That would make the most sense, I guess.” She paused. “It seems like maybe it was...trying to warn us or something.”

Dash narrowed his eyes in confusion. “Why would it try to warn us if it’s a dog? Those things want to kill us. They’re *evil*!”

“Maybe not all of them are bad,” Saderia replied, seeing an image of the strange shadows from some of her Dreams flash through her mind. She let out a sigh. “I wish I knew more about those dogs.”

“Not me,” Dash growled with a shudder. “Those things are dangerous. I hope we never see one again.”

Saderia just shrugged and kept quiet, though secretly she couldn’t agree. While the thought of coming face to face with one of the strange canines seemed terrifying, she couldn’t help but feel curious about them. If she did meet one, what kind of stores would it tell her?—provided it didn’t attack her, of course. Staring out at the desert around her, she wondered how it was possible that those dogs even survived in such a rugged place and why they continued to live there. She also couldn’t help but wonder if they were truly as evil as they seemed to be. Were they really just out to get her and her kingdom, or did they have some sort of reason to have started that fight?

“What were your other Dreams about?” Dash asked, tearing her out of her thoughts.

Blinking, Saderia thought back to some of the first Dreams she had experienced and felt her heart skip a beat when she remembered the

intensity of them. “The first Dream I had was mostly about the forest,” she murmured, “but I remember a part about the desert. I saw the desert and then I heard this voice...a voice that sounded exactly like the one I heard just before that dog leapt out at us from behind that sand dune.”

“What did it say?” Dash asked.

“He didn’t really say anything. All he did was let out a howl and say that strange name—Claw.”

“Claw?”

“Yeah, that name the two figures were talking about in my third Dream.”

Dash slowly sat up with a confused look on his face. “What exactly happened in your third Dream?”

Saderia let out a sigh as she glanced up at the stars. “I was in the desert the whole time in that Dream. I remember seeing these two shadowy figures in the distance. Now that I look back, they were really hard to make out, but I’m almost certain their silhouettes resembled the dogs. After all, they had really long noses and extremely short, bushy tails. The bigger, gruffer dog had amber eyes and the skinner dog with the softer voice had light brown eyes. I think I remember hearing them say that name—Claw—when they were fighting.

“The brown-eyed dog thought the amber-eyed dog killed her,” she went on as the Dream flickered through her mind. Shivering, she added, “Claw must be another dog and she must have meant something to the brown-eyed dog. The gruffer, darker dog snarled something to the other one and then lunged at the brown-eyed dog. After that, they started fighting and I saw the amber-eyed dog pin down the other one.”

“So those dogs even fight amongst each other?”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Did you even listen to anything besides that?”

Dash blinked in surprise at her sharp tone. “I-I’m sorry,” he stammered. “Was there anything else in that Dream?” he added after a slight hesitation.

Saderia let out a sigh and turned away to stare up at the stars. “Yes,” she murmured. “After the fight between the two dogs...everything just went black. I kept hearing snarls all around me, but in the distance I could hear a voice. I’m almost certain it was the voice of the brown-eyed dog that was

fighting. Just as the snarls grew louder, I think I heard him say that he'd help us."

"Why would it—?" At a stern glance from Saderia, Dash quickly lightened his skeptical tone. "Why would *he* want to protect us?"

"I don't know," Saderia replied softly. "Maybe he just felt sorry for us. I'm not sure. All I know is that he wanted to help us. Whatever reason it was for, he seemed determined to protect us."

Dash frowned in confusion as he glanced at the sky. "That's... weird." With a sigh, he decided to drop it as he muttered, "Either way, I guess it doesn't really matter right now. What was your next Dream about?"

A deep frown creased Saderia's face as her thoughts turned to the cryptic Dream she had experienced. "It was...strange," she murmured. "Everything was black and white, but I think I must have been standing on the grass right at the edge of the desert, right on the border between the desert and the forest. I was staring out at the desert and the sand in front of me seemed a pale white. When I looked behind me at the forest, everything was black and ominous. I think the darkness represented danger and the whiteness represented hope. The forest was already ruined...and the desert was our only hope of survival.

"I remember racing out into the desert as fast as I could and...I suddenly saw this splotch of green—a new forest!" Her heart leapt as she went on. "I tried to run toward it, but it kept getting farther away until it disappeared completely. I think I must have stumbled after it disappeared and all of a sudden, the desert around me turned black. I think that was meant to show that the desert was now as dangerous as the forest even though it had seemed hopeful before."

Feeling a sharp shiver of dread, she whispered, "In the Dream, I turned around to look back, but when I tried to see through the blackness, the only thing I saw were these dark red paw prints leading up to me—my paw prints. Remember the map Mom and Dad had in the forest that showed all the places...and marked off the dangerous places in red? I think the red was meant to represent...doom. And I think it meant that...my own paws were leading me to my doom."

Dash's eyes widened in horror as she numbly continued, "I started hearing growls in the Dream, but I couldn't see anything... Something lunged at me and I fell to the ground, but I don't think it ever actually hurt

me because something...stopped it. At least, I think it did. After that, I heard the voice of that dog again. He told me...that 'the pack' is vicious and that he would come back to save us."

Dash narrowed his eyes in confusion. "The pack? What's that?"

Saderia shook her head helplessly. "I have no idea. It must have something to do with the dogs... Either way, that brown-eyed dog is trying to help us, so not all the dogs are bad. One isn't, at least."

"I guess," Dash muttered. He paused. "What about the red paw prints thing? Do you really think...you're doomed?"

Shivering, Saderia promptly turned away. "I don't know. I don't know what to make of that. Either way, though...even if I am 'doomed'... there's really nothing I can do about it but keep going and try to figure these things out."

Dash glanced down. "I guess you're right."

"The last Dream I had was about the fight that happened," she went on softly. "It just...it showed me what was happening and that Mom was being attacked. I heard the voice of the brown-eyed dog in that Dream when he let out that howl, but after that, I heard these strange words in my mind. They said...*'Not them. Not her. Not again.'* I think those words must have been something he said or thought. He said it—or thought it—right as a dog leapt at us in my Dream. I just don't know what it means."

Dash sighed and studied the ground. "I don't think there's any way of knowing right now, Saderia. Your Dreams are almost never clear."

She let out a long breath of air as her curious amber eyes dulled. "I guess you're right," she muttered. "There really is nothing we can do now. I just wish we could learn more about those dogs, especially the one in my Dreams. Maybe we'll meet him in the future." She paused then smiled a weak smile. "I hope we do."

Dash glanced at her uneasily out of the corner of his eye before shrugging and looking away. "Er...if you really want to, then I guess I hope so, too. Just try not to get hurt."

"I won't," Saderia murmured. She lifted her gaze to the stars and let out a heavy sigh. "That's all the Dreams I've had so far. We should probably get some sleep tonight and we need someone to keep watch. I could stay up tonight and..."



“No, I’ll do it,” Dash interrupted. Before she could protest, he rapidly explained, “Don’t worry about me, Saderia, I’m not really tired. Makero took over my shift really early last night because he couldn’t sleep...and I don’t think I could fall asleep in this place anyway. It’s better for you to get your rest because you’re leading us and because you might have another Dream if you go to sleep. One that could help us.”

Saderia paused then finally relented. “Fine,” she muttered. “I guess that’s a good point. But I’m keeping watch tomorrow night no matter what you say.”

Dash let out a sigh. “All right. Just get some rest tonight. That way you’ll have plenty of energy tomorrow to be able to stay up.”

“I suppose you’re right.” She gave him a slight smile and a playful flick of her tail as she settled down on the cool sandy ground. “Thanks, Dash.”

He smiled back. “No problem, Saderia.”

Sighing, Saderia closed her eyes and rested her head against the cool ground, nestling her nose into Dash’s soft paw. As the stars twinkled down on her, she knew she should feel afraid, but just for this one night, she allowed herself to feel safe beside her closest friend. When she realized that there might be another animal out there who would look after her, she finally let out a long yawn and fell into a deep, contented sleep filled with nothing but longing for a hopeful future.

Blinding sunlight glistened in the light blue sky as Dingo awoke to the furious growling of the pack members. After blinking sleep out of his eyes, he instantly closed them again to stop despair from taking over. Taking a deep breath of thick, blood-scented air, he let out a long, slow sigh. At first, he had felt hopeful and excited when he had realized the forest animals were winning. He had even gotten a good laugh out of seeing the dingoes infuriated, surprised expressions when they had returned to camp after being defeated. But then the pack had gotten angry and he’d realized that even if the forest animals had won this fight, the dingoes probably wouldn’t stop until they had found some way to hurt them. They would do anything to kill the forest food, only now they would do it for revenge as well as sport. And they’d use whatever cruel, backhanded methods they could.

Trying to shake away a tingle of pain, Dingo walked silently to the entrance of the den and looked out at the camp. All of the dingoes were growling furiously to each other, discussing plans and strategies to kill the forest food. The most popular idea was to find a way to lead a few away from the whole and pick them off one by one.

Watching them, the worst part for Dingo wasn't knowing the horrible things they would do, but knowing he would be powerless to stop them. Once again, the desert would be stained scarlet and once again, his paws would be sticky with the blood.

He wanted to get out of camp to be alone with his tormented thoughts, but he was too afraid to go out alone when everyone, especially Bone, was in a murderous mood. He was a popular target, after all. It would be almost too easy for Bone to follow him and kill him away from camp then blame the forest animals. Dingo didn't particularly feel like being killed that day, so he knew it was best to stay in camp even though his paws still itched to leave.

Suddenly his ears pricked up when he picked out one distinctive voice. "Bone," Rip called. "Tear and I are going out to spy on the forest food. We'll try to figure out a way to split them up so we can get them."

"Yeah, they don't know the desert—they'll get lost if we can separate them!" Tear added.

Bone growled approvingly to them as they began padding out of camp. They paused only when Dingo leapt out in front of them to stop them.

Watching Bone carefully out of the corner of his eye, Dingo quickly turned to them and asked, "You two are going out in the desert?"

Rip glanced at him and frowned. "Yeah. Why?"

"Can I come with you?" he pleaded.

Rip curled his lip. "Why would we want to bring you along?"

Dropping his voice, Dingo whispered, "I'll go off on my own later. I just want to be seen leaving camp with you two."

"Why?"

"Self-preservation."

"Um...okay...Whatever you say." Rip eyed him curiously with a confused expression before giving him a slight shrug of his shoulders. "I guess you can come." He glanced at Tear. "Let's go."

Tear looked unhappy and a little confused, but he just nodded. "Fine."

"Thanks," Dingo said as he fell into step behind them and followed them out into the desert. He felt Bone's amber gaze on his back the whole time, but he didn't dare look back at him.

Rip and Tear kept giving him odd looks as they padded away from camp. When they were finally far enough away to be out of Bone's sight, Dingo paused then said, "Okay, thanks, guys. I'll just go my own way now."

Rip nodded slowly, a questioning look on his face. "What was that all about?"

"Just playing the game," Dingo replied before turning around to walk off in another direction.

Rip and Tear exchanged glances, shrugged, and walked off with a muttered comment about his mental health. Ignoring it, Dingo was relieved to know that they had helped him and that he could now be on his own without a death threat hanging over his head. Bone wouldn't try to kill him if he thought he was with Rip and Tear; they were witnesses. As he walked away from Rip and Tear, he glanced back and then kept on walking, not wanting to think about how they could help him one minute and kill forest animals the next.

Making his way aimlessly through the desert, Dingo wasn't sure what he should do about all the turmoil in his life. Forest animals were being plotted against and murdered and he was finally starting to believe Bone had killed Claw. Unfortunately, he didn't know what to do about either situation and his own guilt was really starting to get to him.

Alone with his dark, guilty thoughts, he almost didn't see the two strange animals at first, but when he wandered over the next sand dune, he spotted them a dune away and froze in shock. One was yellow orange with pitch black stripes; it had a fluffy tail and determined amber eyes. The other was dark brown with a darker tuft of fur on its head and on the end of its tail; it too had hopeful amber eyes, but Dingo could sense fear in them, as well. Very cautiously, he crept forward, his heart hammering in his chest the whole time. He frowned in confusion. What were two forest animals doing out there in the desert all alone?

They stood right in front of him just beyond the sand dune he was hiding behind, appearing to be talking. A tiger and a lion, he realized. His tail flicked with distress. Why weren't they in one of the larger groups of forest animals? Didn't they know how dangerous it was in the desert, especially with only the two of them? Were they lost?

Watching them closely and staying hidden, his previous dark thoughts were temporarily forgotten and replaced with curiosity. He had always wondered about forest animals and Claw had, too, although they'd never actually seen any before. There was something especially intriguing about the two in front of him, though he couldn't quite explain why. Maybe it was the determination in their eyes or the way their fur touched reassuringly. Whatever it was, he hoped with all his heart that the pack wouldn't find these two and kill them.

As he stared at them, his ears pricked up when the lion-thing spoke.

"Do you think it will be long before we find Makero and the group?" Hope and fear mingled in its voice.

Dingo frowned. What was a Makero?

The tiger-thing sighed. "I...I don't know," it admitted. "I have this feeling that we're going the right way, but I can't be sure. Maybe they've just moved on, so maybe it will be a while before we find them. We'll be okay, though." Despite its confident tone, the tiger's voice held uncertainty and concern. The tiger smiled reassuringly at the lion, its amber gaze uneasy but kind. Dingo could detect strong affection between the two. He blinked in surprise at the powerful bond that was practically radiating off of them. He and Claw had been that close.

He stared, intrigued by what they were saying and a little confused about some things, like why forest animals were in the desert in the first place. By the tone of their voices, he decided the lion was male and the tiger was female. When he looked at the tiger, he could tell that she was trying to look confident and comforting, but beneath that mask there was unease and worry. Who did that remind him of? Dingo sucked in a quick, silent breath but kept watching them.

"What about the wild dogs?" the lion asked.

So they knew about the danger, after all. Were they lost then? How had they gotten separated from the larger group of forest animals? Had one

of the dingoes already managed to separate them from the others? He felt cold with fear for the two animals just thinking about it.

The tiger paused then said, "I told you. It'll be okay. You know how to fight and so do I. We'll be able to run if we can fight them off just enough to surprise them. I think they underestimate us. That could be an advantage because if they don't expect us to put up a decent fight, they won't fight us with all of their strength."

Dingo blinked several times. That was *his* trick.

"Or they could be underestimating us because they *can* beat us," the lion disagreed.

"We'll just have to keep our strength up," she replied soothingly. "I'll look after you. And you can look after me," she added, seeing the lion's concerned look.

Dingo could only stare at the tiger. *What* had she just said? That... was the same thing Claw had said to him a long time ago... For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to run over to that tiger and find out what was going on and help them. But he couldn't do that; the pack would kill him if they found out. Besides, it seemed like every time he tried to get close to an animal, it died. A low whimper escaped his throat when he realized that the tiger was in danger. What if she died, too? How would the lion feel? Dingo flinched. He knew exactly how the lion would feel if his closest friend was killed.

Dingo blinked, trying to push away his thoughts and reminding himself that he knew nothing about these animals and had no control over what happened to them. The only reason that tiger was reminding him so much of Claw, the one he had loved more than anyone, was just because he was insane. That was all. It had to be. He couldn't bear to think that this animal could be just like Claw because then he would want to get to know her and then they would die and then he would be crushed. They had no chance, not out here in the desert, not all alone, and he couldn't bear to see the spirit that reminded him so much of his sister die again. He knew he should just walk away and forget about them.

But he didn't. He kept watching them. Because the look in the tiger's eyes was so similar to the way his sister had looked, it was almost enough to drive him crazy. He wanted to know more about these animals,

but he couldn't get close to them. He *couldn't*. The tiger was probably nothing like Claw. He was just imagining it. He should leave.

But he didn't.

"Thanks," the lion murmured to the tiger. "I'll take care of you too, I promise." The look in his eyes was worried and afraid and Dingo knew exactly how he felt. Tears pricked his eyes as he continued to watch them.

The lion paused then asked, "What about Karenisha and Makero? Do you think they're okay?" That thing again. And what was a Karenisha? Were they *names*? Forest food names? What did those things—animals—mean to these two?

"They must be okay," the tiger replied. "I know they are. And you know they would always put the kingdom first. We'll just have to be strong and find them."

"Okay...but even if we do catch up to them, will we find a new home?" A new home? What exactly was wrong with their old one? That sound he had heard in the forest a long time ago was weird, but what was it?

"We can't keep stressing about that," the tiger told the lion. "I'm sure there must be some other place out there besides our old home." Dingo noticed the sadness in her voice when she said 'our *old* home.' "This desert can't go on forever."

"I hope not," the lion said. "I hate this place. It's so hot and empty and it has those dogs." Dingo could sympathize with him, although it didn't feel hot to him. Of course, he had grown up in the desert—it must be different for the forest animals who had grown up in the considerably cooler forest.

The lion paused. "Did you have any Dreams last night?"

At first, the tiger didn't say anything, but then she murmured, "Yes, one, but it doesn't help me understand much. I was in the desert and I could sense the dogs hiding out there somewhere, about to attack us. I don't know when it's going to happen, *if* it's going to happen, and I guess we just have to be on our guard. It was scary, but I felt like there was some hope, like something good would happen to help us. I'm almost certain that when the dogs jumped out at us, I caught a glimpse of the brown-eyed dog. Then everything went black."

"The brown-eyed dog again?"

She nodded.

Dingo blinked several times. He was a brown-eyed dog. Did she mean him? He shook his head forcefully, wondering why he had thought that. It was a dream and it didn't have anything to do with real life; the tiger was probably just scared and having nightmares about the pack. As for the weird 'brown-eyed dog' she had mentioned...well, dreams were odd sometimes. He couldn't understand why the tiger and lion looked so thoughtful about some dream—it was just a dream, after all. It didn't mean anything...

Dingo didn't have too long to wonder about it because the lion soon spoke up, his voice shaky with fear. "So we're going to be attacked?"

"We...just have to keep our eyes and ears open. Like we did in Twisted Creek," she replied. "We survived that, didn't we? We can survive this, too. Together."

The tiger's confidence, faked or not, was catchy and the lion managed a slight smile. "Maybe. I guess we'll be able to make it."

"We have food, my Dreams, and each other. I think we'll be fine."

"A map might be better," the lion disagreed, but he looked hopeful all the same.

The tiger gave him a light flick of her tail and together they turned around and began walking. Dingo knew the desert by heart and he knew exactly where they were headed. He also knew they were lost, so shouldn't he help them? He wanted to, desperately, but he reminded himself that he couldn't. The pack would somehow find out and exile him if he tried. The forest animals would be killed anyway no matter what he did, so he shouldn't get involved. He couldn't afford to have his heart broken all over again.

Forcing himself to turn around, he walked quickly back to camp, telling himself to just forget about the two animals. But no matter how hard he tried, he could not keep them out of his mind.

# Chapter Sixteen

## Survival

Saderia's cracked paw pads stumbled listlessly across the burning desert sand as she struggled to keep her head up and her eyes open. Her tail dragged silently across the gritty ground, leaving a thin line through the yellow brown sand. Sighing, she fought to keep moving as the sun beat down on her back, scorching her fur and making her eyelids droop with exhaustion. Numbly she swiped her dry tongue around her mouth, desperate for water, but found nothing but sandy fur. Trying to ignore the pain in her raw, dry throat, she continued moving, her clumsy paws churning up piles of dirty sand.

Letting out a low, inaudible groan, she let her head droop closer to the ground as her muddled thoughts drifted to her father. When an image of Makero's worried face flickered into her mind, she winced and nearly stumbled across the sand. After three days had passed since they had gotten lost, she had already accepted the fact that she had chosen the wrong path and that finding her family wouldn't be quite as easy as she hoped. Her father's fate was the only thing that worried her. What had he done when he had first discovered she and Dash were missing? Had he stopped the group to turn them around and search for them, preventing them from finding a new home sooner? Or had he gone off into the desert all alone to search for them by himself?

Trying not to flinch, she pushed the thoughts away and forced herself to concentrate on where she was going. No matter what had happened to Makero, she could only hope that he had been smart enough not to get lost himself and that soon he would find them.

Her eyes slipped shut and she stumbled helplessly forward, feeling her pack of food jump and smack against her back as she struggled to regain her footing. Wincing, she let out a groan before finally giving up and sinking to her paws. Her ears pricked up when Dash let out a heavy sigh and collapsed to the ground beside her, his chest heaving with heavy pants.



“Saderia,” he gasped. “It’s been...three days! I can’t keep...walking out here in this...heat!”

Saderia let out a long sigh. “I...know,” she panted back, struggling to breathe clean air into her lungs and wincing when all she got was a blast of musty dust. A shudder raced through her body as she slumped forward, her head sinking into the sand below.

Dash buried his face in his paws. “When are we going to find Makero and the others? When are we going to get out of this desert?”

Saderia didn’t bother to look up or try to answer his question. She didn’t know the answer and with nothing but sand in all directions, she didn’t want to know either.

Dash remained silent when she refused to speak up and let his mane fall over his face, trying desperately to avoid the sun.

For what seemed like hours, they laid there in silence, refusing to look up and trying to ignore the searing pain of the sun beating down on them. Orange and dark brown paws splayed out in all directions across the dusty desert sand while their white and brown chests heaved with pants. Amber eyes blinked rapidly to try to clear away the stinging sand and tails lashed restlessly back and forth. As the silence persisted, Saderia slowly raised her gaze to the sky, flinching and squinting when the sun burned her eyes. Blinding yellow light blurred before her as she wondered how much more of this she could take and if she really was doomed to die out in the broiling desert.

Her eyes narrowed when a tiny white star gleamed in the light morning sky. As she slowly raised her head to get a better look, she suddenly let out a gasp when a soft, feathery voice echoed from every direction.

“Forest food!”

Saderia let out a gasp of fear and looked up rapidly. She leapt to her feet and looked around wildly, her heart pounding in her chest as she searched for any attackers. Her ears pricked up when a sharp, stunned gasp echoed through the desert.

“She’s *special*!”

“Who’s there?” Saderia demanded. Her paws shuffled wildly against the desert floor as she turned in all directions. She frantically scanned the horizon for any sign of an ambush. Her mind whirled with fear and

confusion as she struggled to find the source of the voice. Had the dogs spotted her and Dash? What did they mean by ‘*special*’?

Her heart beat rapidly in her chest and she turned around and around, straining her ears to listen for the voice. The sound echoed in her mind, soft as if it had echoed over a vast distance, but loud as if the sound was meant for her ears alone. Sand dunes blurred before her gaze as she staggered forward, her eyes scanning the horizon for the dark silhouette of the dogs she had seen in her Dreams. “Show yourself!” she shouted shakily when her surroundings remained the same and she realized she could see nothing but blue sky and brown sand. “Who said that?”

Her body tensed with fear as she searched for an attacker and a jolt of panic shot up her spine when a light paw brushed her back. Whirling around with a gasp of fear, she found herself staring into Dash’s wide, startled eyes.

“Saderia?” he gasped. “Are you...okay?”

Trying to calm the frantic beating of her heart, Saderia slowly stepped back to face her friend. Her amber eyes narrowed with unease

“Who are you talking to?” Dash demanded as a deep frown spread across his face.

Saderia blinked rapidly. “Didn’t you hear it?”

Dash stared at her in shock. “Hear what?”

“That...voice...”

Dash blinked several times. “What voice? I didn’t hear anything.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You didn’t? But it was so clear to me! How could you not have heard it? It seemed like I heard it from every direction!”

Dash slowly shook his head, his eyes narrowing. “I didn’t hear anything, Saderia.”

Blinking, Saderia turned away from him and faced the desert, her tail flicking uneasily back and forth. No matter how long she stared or how intently she peered off into the distance, she could see nothing. It was as if the voice had come out of nowhere.

After several minutes, Dash slowly stepped forward and tapped her on the shoulder. “Maybe you’re just...hearing things,” he stammered.

Saderia’s gaze absently swept the desert one more time. “Maybe,” she muttered.

Dash gently laid his paw over her shoulders. "Come on; we should probably get going. The heat's probably just getting to us."

"Maybe," she repeated, refusing to tear her gaze off of the horizon. After several more moments, she finally gave up and turned around when he gave her a slight tap on her shoulder. She reluctantly fell into step behind him when he began to walk away, her tail flicking anxiously back and forth. The voice replayed over and over in her mind as she turned away from the desert and stared at her paws. There was no one around... Dash hadn't heard it...and yet it had sounded perfectly clear to her. Was it really just the heat getting to her?

Casting a glance back at the desert, her eyes narrowed in unease. Maybe the voice she had heard was another mystery she hadn't yet solved or maybe it was just her imagination. Either way, as she forced herself to turn around and keep moving, she couldn't help wondering: Were they being watched?

"Stupid forest food," Rip muttered as he padded alongside Tear.

"We'll find some and teach them a lesson," Bone agreed with a low growl. "Nothing beats the pack."

Dingo had the unfortunate position of walking between Bone and Rip; needless to say, he got hurt a lot. He saw Bone shoot him a cold glance out of the corner of his eye as they continued walking, as if challenging him to protest. Dingo was smarter than that and he didn't dare even though every instinct inside him was screaming for him to say something or do something to end their hunting party.

In the last four days, he had followed the tiger and lion to get a chance to see them again, telling himself he was only doing it to convince himself that he should have nothing to do with them. He wasn't convinced. If anything, his respect and compassion for them only grew each time he saw them. Each time he saw the tiger urging the lion on with a look of determination and bravery. Each time she told the lion that it would be all right, that she'd stick up for him. The tiger's caring nature and determination was what made him like them. He had only seen those qualities in one other animal and that animal was dead. And he was now sure that there was no one more like Claw than that tiger.

Yet here he was on a forest food hunting party. What choice did he have? Bone and the pack Leader would have exiled him for not going and therefore spoiling their fun even though the only reason Bone had brought him on this stupid hunting party was so he could exile Dingo if he tried to stick up for the forest food. Bone already suspected he wanted to help them and he was probably hoping Dingo would slip up in front of witnesses. Dingo knew it as well as Bone did and Rip and Tear were the only ignorant ones, fooled by the sick game Dingo and the pack had to play.

"There were a lot of those forest animals, more than we thought," Tear spoke up, lashing his tail. "But numbers are all they have."

"Exactly," Rip agreed. "We're tougher than everybody. We'll destroy those animals. All we have to do is scatter them."

"Right," Bone growled. "Then we'll finish off every last one of them. Won't that be fun, Dingo?"

"Bite a cactus, Bone," Dingo muttered, keeping his eyes locked on his paws.

Rip rolled his eyes. "Everybody's so touchy lately."

"Talk about thick air," Tear agreed. "I hate it when it gets like this. It's just like when Claw died."

"Yeah, could you two cool it?" Rip echoed.

"Sorry," Dingo muttered.

Bone just narrowed his eyes. "It's not my fault Dingo has to go around causing trouble with his stupid 'morals.'"

"Oh, so *I'm* the one causing trouble?" he demanded, turning to glare at Bone.

"Cool it, guys," Rip growled. "Or you'll scare all the food away."

"Yeah, shut up," Tear agreed.

"Idiots," Bone muttered while Dingo just sighed.

Bone rolled his eyes in boredom and annoyance. He glanced dully ahead and abruptly stopped. His eyes widened as he forced the others to pause beside him. "I thought I saw something orange over there," he growled quietly to no one in particular.

"Forest food?" Rip asked. His eager gaze sobered and he looked a bit bitter when Bone growled at him to keep his voice down, but his grin remained enthusiastic.

Dingo suddenly felt cold; he hadn't expected them to actually find any of the forest animals. What were forest animals doing this close to the dingo camps unless...

Dingo's eyes widened. "It could be a dingo," he said urgently to Bone, feeling suddenly numb with horror. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be the one to kill them or watch them die. This *couldn't* be happening.

"An orange one?" Tear asked disbelievingly.

"*You're* orange," Dingo snapped, shooting him an annoyed glance.

Bone just snorted. "If you see any dingo with black stripes, then come talk to me. I think I saw this brown thing, too. Maybe a lion."

Dingo's heart sank; was it possible to die of horror? Couldn't he just disappear now?

"Cool, forest food," Rip exclaimed. "How should we attack?"

Bone licked his lips and glanced back and forth between his companions. "Rip, you sneak up to wait behind that sand dune. Tear, you go around and wait behind that dune." He pointed with his tail to a sand dune opposite the one Rip was supposed to hide behind. With a challenging glance at Dingo, he growled, "And Dingo, you and I will wait behind that sand dune, the one right behind the forest food. When I give the signal, we'll attack."

Rip and Tear quietly slipped over to their sand dune hiding places with cold grins while Bone stalked over to the dune he'd been talking about. Dingo slunk after him, though it felt like someone else was controlling his body. He wouldn't have thought he could make any part of him move; he felt hollow with dread, as if he had left his body behind and was floating in some dark, hopeless place. He knew he had to attack the forest animals; he would be exiled if he didn't. Besides, it could be any pair of forest animals and not the ones he had spied on. He shouldn't care about the ones he had been watching, anyway. The tiger was nothing like his sister. *Nothing* like her.

As he followed behind Bone, trying desperately to convince himself the tiger didn't remind him of Claw, he heard himself beg, "Bone, *please*. Don't do this."

His brother glanced back at him, his amber eyes glinting with triumph and disgust. "I don't think so, Dingo. Now come on. You'll be

expected to fight.”

“Don’t,” he whispered helplessly. “Bone, please, I’ll do anything!”

Bone just laughed as he padded calmly over to the sand dune with Dingo trailing hopelessly behind him. Soon they found themselves crouched down at the base of the dune, hidden from sight. Now they could see the forest animals waiting on the other side. Dingo felt sick to his stomach and his whole body grew deathly cold when he realized they were the exact same forest animals he had been watching and both were completely clueless as to what was about to happen. They didn’t stand a chance, not with the dingoes’ element of surprise and the forest animals’ seemingly dwindled strength. Was he really going to just stand by and watch them be killed?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Rip and Tear had gotten in place by crouching down into fighting positions, preparing to strike. Dingo’s eyes widened in alarm when he realized that Bone was about to signal for them to attack. In just a few moments, the two animals he had watched so caringly, the tiger that reminded him of Claw and the lion that reminded him almost of himself, would be killed. And he could do nothing about it; he shouldn’t, he couldn’t. He dug his claws deep into the sand to hold himself together, but he couldn’t breathe or think straight.

The logical part of his mind told him that if he tried to help them, he would only manage to die with them. He wondered if he could run out with the dingoes, but not attack the forest animals, hoping he might not feel so guilty. Wistful thinking; how could he just stand by and watch them be murdered?

His tail twitched rapidly back and forth. He couldn’t stop himself from looking at the tiger and lion and feeling a sharp stab of pain. The tiger still had that determined look in her eyes and now that Dingo looked closely, he could see that she was limping. The lion appeared determined, too, although he seemed worried about the tiger and he looked ready to help her if she stumbled. The love and compassion between them was almost tangible and Dingo felt like everything inside of him was ripping to shreds.

Bone couldn’t kill them.

Not them. Not her. Not again.

Suddenly something inside him snapped and he couldn’t take it; he couldn’t just stand back and let them be killed. *Not again.* No matter what

the consequences, he couldn't let Bone claim another victim; he couldn't let the past repeat itself. *Not them. Not her.* He would die to protect them if he had to.

Without giving himself any time to think about what he was doing, he pushed himself to his paws and leapt to the top of the sand dune, throwing back his head and letting out a loud, echoing howl.

***“Run!”***

As his words rang out through the silent desert, he was dimly aware of Bone's furious growl and of Rip and Tear's shocked gasps, but he barely noticed them. The only thing that mattered was that the tiger and lion turned around, saw him, and took off running as fast as their paws could carry them.

“Please live,” he whispered even as the dingoes took off after them.

Saderia's ears shot up and she whirled around in alarm. Her eyes widened in horror when she caught sight of the brown dog standing at the top of a dune. A sharp gasp escaped her throat when three other dogs leapt to the top of the sand dunes, letting out vicious snarls. Her terrified gaze locked on the light brown eyes of the dog that had howled, their amber depths widening in shock before she desperately whirled around.

“Run!” she screamed as the dogs streamed down toward them.

Loud snarls and vicious howls filled the air as their paws hit the ground. Saderia's heart beat frantically in her chest and her paws slammed into the sand, throwing up huge yellow brown clumps behind her. Hot breath panted on her tail, sending shivers of fear down her spine. Biting her lip to hide a cry of terror, she desperately tried to move faster, ducking her tail between her paws as she struggled to get away. She looked back and let out a cry of fear when one of the dark dogs snapped at her legs.

Letting out a shriek of terror, she leapt forward with Dash close beside her, feeling a stab of agony when her paw slammed against the ground at an awkward angle. Wincing and trying not to fall, she struggled to keep moving, fighting to ignore the searing pain in her injured paw. Her leg burned with pain as it pounded against the ground, sending shivers of panic and fear through Saderia's body. Desperately turning to look back, she let out a gasp of fear when her paw smacked against the ground at the wrong angle and she stumbled helplessly to the ground.

She heard Dash let out a cry of alarm as he skidded to a halt, his brown paws digging deep into the sand. Struggling to get to her paws, Saderia looked up with a cry of fear as two dogs leapt around them, letting out dangerous snarls and turning around to face them. Letting out a muffled cry of fear, she staggered desperately to her feet and whirled around, only to freeze when an almost black, dark brown dog leapt in front of them, his eyes glinting with malice. Her gaze snapped upward when another brown dog trailed anxiously behind him, his eyes shadowed and hollow. Whirling around, she tried to run, but the two dogs that had jumped in front of her stalked closer, their red and orange fur bristling in the sunlight.

Feeling a shiver of fear, she slowly backed away. Her heart pounded as she stared into their weird yellow eyes. She whirled around when a low growl sounded from behind her and found herself staring into the dark brown dog's glinting amber eyes. Taking a frightened step back, she found her gaze wandering toward the skinny brown dog standing beside the dark brown one. Her amber eyes stared deep into his dull light brown eyes as a jolt of shock raced up her spine.

She whirled around when a low growl erupted from behind her and stared fearfully back at the dark brown-black dog as he let out a condescending snicker. "Well, forest food, did you really think you could outrun us?"

Saderia let out a sharp hiss and her claws unsheathed into the dull, gritty ground.

The dark brown dog just laughed at her. "And now you think you can fight us? Stupid forest food. Don't you know you're going to die?"

"How pathetic," the red dog growled from behind her.

Saderia whirled around to face him before turning rapidly back around to stare at the dark brown one. Her amber eyes widened in fear as she pressed closer to Dash. "F-forest food?" she stammered.

"Of course," the blackish one snarled. "Don't you know what you are?"

"What are *you*?" she demanded.

"We're dingoes," growled the red one. "We'll rip you to shreds. You don't stand a chance."

"Dingoes?" Dash whispered.



“Yeah, we rule the desert,” the orange one snickered. “You’re just the prey.”

Saderia shivered and turned to face him before looking back at the darker dingo. “What are two weak pieces of forest food like yourselves doing so far into the desert?” he growled, chuckling as he stepped forward and prodded Saderia with a dark brown paw. When Saderia hissed and backed away, the dingo just let out a laugh. “How cute. They actually think they stand a chance.” He bared his fangs in a menacing snarl and stalked toward them, his amber eyes glinting with blood lust. He opened his mouth to order the others to attack, but before he could say a word, the skinny brown dingo spoke up for the first time.

“Bone,” he growled, “don’t.”

The dark brown dingo stopped and turned to face him with a low, dangerous growl. His amber eyes narrowed with pure hatred. “Why shouldn’t I?” he snorted as the skinnier dog looked away. “Back off, Dingo. You almost ruined this attack, but if you do anything else, I promise you that you will be exiled the moment we get back to camp with our prey.” He flicked his tail carelessly toward Saderia and Dash.

“No!” the skinny dingo exclaimed. His eyes widened as he looked up at Bone. “You don’t understand!”

“I understand everything,” Bone growled. “I understand that this will hurt you, so why shouldn’t I do it?” He let out a cold laugh. “Thanks for giving me another reason to kill them. What do these stupid pieces of forest food mean to you anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Dingo pleaded. “Just leave them alone!”

Bone snorted. “No. Now why don’t you sit back and watch them die? It seems to be the one thing you’re good at.”

Wincing, Dingo turned desperately to the dark red dingo standing behind Saderia. “Rip,” he begged, “please don’t attack. It’s important!”

Rip just rolled his eyes, his red paws scraping impatiently across the desert floor. “What’s your problem, Dingo? They’re just forest food. Why shouldn’t I attack?”

“Stop messing up the Hunt,” growled the orange dingo beside Rip.

Dingo turned desperately to the chubby orange dog. “Tear, don’t,” he pleaded. “Just leave these two alone! That’s all I’m asking!”

“Oh, so you wouldn’t mind if we killed other forest food?” Bone taunted. “So long as we left these ones alone?”

“No, I would, I just…” Dingo trailed off with a helpless sigh as he turned to the red and orange dingoes standing opposite of him and Bone.

“Rip, Tear, please. I know Bone won’t listen to me, but can’t you two please just do this one thing for me?”

“We don’t owe you anything,” Rip growled, lashing his dark red tail while Tear nodded coldly.

Before Dingo could say anything else, Bone lunged forward in one quick movement and shoved Dingo to the ground. Holding him down with a rough paw, he looked up and sneered at Saderia and Dash. “Attack!” he snarled.

“No!” Dingo howled.

Saderia let out a shriek of fear as Rip and Tear leapt at her and Dash, but before she could react, Rip shoved her to the ground. A sharp scream tore out of her throat as her back slammed against the ground before she smacked Rip across the face and rolled away. Her ears were suddenly filled with the sound of low growls and Dash’s fearful snarl as she backed away from Rip, her eyes never leaving his. She heard Dash let out a loud cry as Tear shoved him to the ground, but before she could help, Rip darted forward and slammed into her side. Saderia let out a cry as she stumbled to the side, but before she could try to stop herself, Bone lunged forward and threw her to the ground. A sharp cry tore out of her throat before she rolled away from him. She winced when she felt his claws leave long scars across her shoulders. Leaping to her paws, she immediately turned to face him. She dove forward to try to rake his face with her claws, but before she could get close, sharp teeth sunk into her back leg and forced her to the ground. She let out a painful scream as Rip dragged her backward.

Blood spattered the ground and waves of pain raced through Saderia’s body, turning her sight hazy as she struggled to find Dash. Her heart beat faster with fear when she saw Tear pounce onto him. She breathed a sigh of relief when Dash threw him away. Tear leapt to his paws almost immediately and fainted right, lunging over Dash when he tried to swipe the orange dingo’s paws out from under him. Whirling around, he tried to leap onto Dash’s shoulders, but Dash ducked away and tore his claws across Tear’s face. Tear staggered backward with a sharp yelp. A low

snarl tore out of his throat when Dash lunged at him and the two went rolling to the ground, their amber and yellow eyes glinting with fury as they dug their claws into each other's shoulders.

Saderia caught a flash of Dingo's fearful, indecisive eyes before she whirled around and yanked herself free of Rip's painful grasp. Rip let out a snarl as she flashed her claws across his chest, his yellow eyes glinting with rage.

"Rip, take care of the lion," Bone shouted when Tear let out a strangled howl of pain. "I'll get the tiger!"

Rip nodded and let out a low snarl as he lunged toward Dash. Saderia opened her mouth to call out a warning, but her words were interrupted by a scream of pain when Bone lunged forward and sunk his fangs deep into her shoulder. Wrenching herself away from him as blood streaked down her leg, she whirled around just in time to duck when the dark dingo lunged at her. She turned and smacked her claws across Bone's face. Bone barely flinched as he let out a growl and lunged at her. A sting of pain across her forehead made her face feel numb as she dove away to avoid Bone's attack. Her heart thumped wildly in her chest as she turned around to find Dash and her amber eyes widened in horror when she saw Rip race up behind him and lunge for his throat.

"Dash, look out!" she screamed.

Dash whirled around, letting out a cry of fear when he saw Rip. Just barely managing to dodge away, he let out a cry of pain when Rip turned and dug his claws into his shoulders. Shaking him off, Dash tore his claws across Rip's scarred muzzle and let out a shout of alarm when Rip flinched away and Tear took his place. He ducked away as Tear leapt at him then fought back when Rip snapped at him with sharp, yellow fangs.

Saderia let out a scream as Bone threw her to the ground. She struggled to pick herself up as he swiped at her with sharp claws and heavy paws. Ducking under his blows, she let out a furious hiss and slashed a deep wound across his shoulder. Blood spilled out of his dark brown leg as he lunged forward. Saderia lashed out with her claws, scoring a bloody wound across his forehead before he shoved her away. She stumbled to her paws, but before she could fight back, she let out a cry of fear when Bone lunged at her and shoved her back against the ground. He let out a snarl as his bloody claws dug into her shoulders, pinning her to the ground before she

could try to lash out or fight back. Her eyes widened as they stared up into his and a loud scream tore out of her chest when he lunged for her throat.

“No!”

A loud howl echoed through the clearing and just as Saderia felt Bone’s teeth sink into her skin, she let out a gasp of relief when suddenly he was torn away from her. Her eyes opened wide and she staggered to her feet. Her mind whirled with confusion when she heard Bone let out a howl of surprise and pain. A soft gasp escaped her throat when she saw Dingo standing in front of her, his brown tail lashing furiously back and forth as he glared at Bone. Blood dripped from the back of Bone’s neck as he glared dangerously back at Dingo.

Saderia blinked in surprise, but before she could realize what had happened, she was interrupted by a cry of pain. Whirling around, she let out a gasp when she saw Dash struggle against the red and orange dingoes that were holding him down. She darted forward to help him just as Dingo and Bone lunged at each other.

Blood seeped into her mouth as she dug her teeth into Rip’s back leg and dragged him away from Dash, hearing him let out a loud yelp of pain. She let go and swiped her claws across his muzzle when he whirled around to fight. Dash shoved Tear away from him and before the orange dingo could attack, Saderia leapt at him, driving him back with sharp slashes of her claws.

A loud howl split the air as Dingo suddenly crashed to the ground behind her, but before Saderia could turn around to see what had happened, she was stunned by a painful strike from behind. Slamming onto the ground, she let out a strangled cry of pain when Rip shoved her down and dug his claws deep into her shoulders. Looking up, she let out a gasp when she saw Dingo leap toward Rip and drag him off of her.

“Hey!” Rip let out a yelp of surprise as he struggled to fight back, his yellow eyes blazing with surprise and disbelief.

“What do you think you’re doing, Dingo?” Tear exclaimed as he abandoned his fight with Dash and turned around to stare at them.

Rip turned to glare at him as he fought against Dingo. “You could *help*, you know!” Tear just shrugged, but before he could step forward to help, Rip shoved Dingo away from him and growled in his face. “What’d you do that for? What’s your problem?”

Dingo didn't reply.

Saderia turned to look around and let out a gasp when she saw Bone lunge toward her. Rip let out a yelp of surprise when Dingo dove past him and landed right in front of her before Bone could reach her. His eyes narrowed as he faced the dark dingo.

"Back off," he snarled.

Saderia stared at him in shock while Dash slowly got to his paws, his eyes wide with shock. Rip and Tear blinked and sat back, their sides heaving with heavy pants and their yellow eyes wide with surprise as they watched the scene unfold in front of them.

Bone narrowed his eyes. "What do you think you're doing, Dingo? Protecting the forest food?" He narrowed his eyes. "Bad move."

"I don't care," Dingo snarled. "If you want to kill them, you'll have to kill me first."

"That can be arranged."

"Go ahead and try it."

Bone raised an eyebrow. "When did you get so bold?" He let out a cold laugh. "You do realize that this is exactly the kind of thing I've been looking for to exile you."

"I don't care," Dingo snapped. "If you want to exile me, fine! Go ahead and do it! I'm sick of playing this stupid game anyway! Just do whatever you want because I will not let you kill them. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure you don't kill her spirit again."

"Speaking of Claw, what about her?" Bone replied, never missing a beat. "I bet she really appreciates the fact that you just threw away your stupid promise to her for two pathetic pieces of forest food."

Dingo let out a snarl. "I didn't throw away my promise!"

"I thought you promised Claw you would suffer for her *in the pack*."

Dingo gritted his teeth. "That's *not* what I promised her!"

Bone raised an eyebrow. "You promised her that you would 'keep going and keep the truth *alive*.' When you're an outcast, it'll be almost *too* easy to kill you. Bravo, Dingo. You just destroyed your great promise to your dead sister. I can't believe Claw actually thought she could depend on you."

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "Knock it off, Bone. Go back to camp, exile me, kill me, whatever. Just leave these two forest animals alone."

You're not killing Claw's spirit, not again."

"What are you talking about anyway?"

Dingo let out a low growl as he faced Bone, barely a foot away from him. "Enough games!" he snapped. "Just tell me what you did to Claw!"

Saderia's eyes widened in shock as his words echoed through the desert and her mouth gaped open in surprise.

Bone narrowed his eyes. "I don't have to tell you anything." He took a threatening step toward Dingo, his amber eyes glinting with hatred. "Stay out of my business."

"Stay away from me!" Dingo snarled, backing away.

Bone let out a humorless laugh. "Prepare to die! Just like your sister!"

A thunderous growl tore out of Dingo's throat and he glared at Bone, his paws practically shaking with fury. "You killed her!" he shouted. "Didn't you?!"

Rip and Tear let out gasps of shock as Bone narrowed his eyes. "You don't know anything."

Before Dingo could respond, Bone let out a furious snarl and lunged toward him, his amber eyes glinting with rage. Dingo let out a howl of pain and leapt away from Bone, his light brown eyes blazing with a deep, fiery anger. A low growl tore out of his throat as he leapt toward Bone and they collapsed to the ground, their dark snarls filling the tense air around them. A thick smell of blood rose in the air as Dingo tore his claws across Bone's face, staining his fur scarlet. Bone lunged forward and dug his fangs into Dingo's shoulder, only to stumble back when Dingo tore himself away from Bone. His light brown eyes blazed with hatred as blood splattered the sandy ground.

Blood-chilling howls echoed around the desert as they lashed out at each other, scoring deep, bloody wounds across each other's sides and faces. Saderia's eyes widened as she watched them lunge at each other, their fangs stained red. With yellow eyes stretched wide with shock, Rip and Tear stood frozen to the spot, hardly daring to breathe.

A cold, furious growl rumbled through the clearing as Dingo glared at Bone. His eyes narrowed and a dark shadow fell over their usually light brown depths.

"I'll make you pay."

Saderia's eyes widened. Her mouth gaped open as she struggled to understand what was going on. She let out a gasp and jumped when she felt a sharp nudge on her blood-soaked shoulder before whirling around to stare into Dash's wide, terrified eyes.

"Quick, while they're distracted! We have to run!" he hissed.

"But—"

"Saderia, they're going to kill us!" he exclaimed. "We have to get out of here!"

Saderia glanced at the fight and winced when she saw the brown dingo stumble backwards, his shoulder dripping red with blood. As she watched, she found herself unable to tear her horrified gaze off the brown dingo, but she finally forced herself to turn around when Dash gave her a sharp tap on the shoulder.

"Saderia—"

"You're right," she interrupted him. "Let's go!"

A hint of relief dawned in Dash's eyes as he nodded briskly and turned away from her. Saderia cast one last glance back at the fighting dingoes before reluctantly turning around to follow Dash. She squeezed her eyes shut as her wounds seared with pain and an image of the two fighting dingoes burned in her mind. Her Dream flashed before her eyes, leaving her feeling numb with shock and disbelief as she darted over a sand dune. Looking back, she saw the brown dingo fall back with a sharp yelp of pain before she forced herself to turn around and keep moving. The last thing she heard before she disappeared out of sight was a loud howl and a dangerous snarl echoing through the desert.

# Chapter Seventeen

## Success Is Failure

Dingo's tail flicked miserably across the cold, gritty sand as he stared lifelessly up at the craggy wall of the den. His eyes were wide and blank as if he was watching his own life slip away. He was uncomfortably aware of the sound of Bone talking to the pack Leader just outside the Leader's den and of the excited murmurs of the pack members as they realized there would soon be a new outcast. Dingo put his head between his paws and let out a sigh. What had he done to deserve this? Why had he destroyed everything he'd done to stay in the pack just to protect those two forest animals?

Looking back on the scene he had caused, he groaned. After the tiger and lion had fled, he and Bone had eventually stopped fighting, but only because Bone still couldn't kill him in front of witnesses. Bone seemed to think it would be much more interesting to torment Dingo some more by exiling him, anyway, which was what Bone and the pack Leader were discussing now.

Dingo hated to admit it, but he was scared. He was scared to be an outcast. After twelve years of seeing starved, disfigured outcasts stumbling through their sham of a life, who could blame him? When he forced himself to think rationally, he realized that he could hide out in his secret den once he was exiled, so that the pack members couldn't find him and hurt him. After all, the only one who even knew of the den's existence was Rip and he had probably already forgotten its exact location.

Nonetheless, even though he might be safe, he knew that if he valued his life, he wouldn't be able to leave the den very often. The pack already made it a sport to torture and kill outcasts, but Dingo had been their number one enemy since day one; he would be hunted down more than most. In the meantime, he would starve since he wouldn't be able to go out to get food as easily as a pack member could.



A tingle of dread shivered up his spine. Soon he would have to leave his camp and everything he had grown up with forever. And then he would die. As he let out a fearful sigh, everything suddenly came rushing back to him, all the recent painful memories.

*“Hey, loser! Get up!” “You know we’re waiting for you to slip up and fail, Dingo, so we can exile you.” “I’m glad Claw’s dead. And I’m glad she suffered before she died.” “Everybody hates you, Dingo. Everyone in the pack wants you dead.” “Die.” “I’m always right. And you’re always wrong.” “You’re nothing to me except an annoying problem to get rid of. Just like your sister.” “Like looking into the future, huh, Dingo?” “You killed your own sister.” “If he doesn’t do a good job in the Hunt, he could be exiled!” “Bad move.” “Crawl on the way out.” “I think I finally pushed you over the edge.” “The Hunt has finally begun!” Not them. Not her. Not again.*

The forest animals. Maybe he could find them again and find out what they were doing in the desert. Maybe he could help them. As he thought about the forest animals, he felt a tinge of both happiness and sadness. He had succeeded in helping them and they had gotten away safely, but at the same time he had failed to keep himself safe and now, in just a matter of moments, he would be exiled. How long would those two forest animals stay alive and safe anyway? What if his sacrifice had been in vain?

Trying not to give into fear, he glanced around his den for the last time. There were two things he wanted to take with him, two things that meant the most to him, that reminded him of the past and of the reason he was forcing himself to keep going: Claw’s ribbon and her journal.

Taking the two treasures, he was ready to leave and he tried to put his mind to it. With a long sigh, he began padding sullenly toward the entrance of the den, but froze when he saw dark brown paws step out in front of him, blocking his way. He looked up as Bone paused and looked Dingo over. His triumphant sneer grew wider as he took in Dingo’s dull, defeated expression.

Bone let out a low chuckle. “Well, Dingo, I always knew you’d make a mistake and this is it. Allowing forest food to run off, trying to kill me...”

"I didn't try to kill you," Dingo growled tensely, wondering if it was true. He had been furious when he finally realized what must be the truth, that Bone must have killed his sister, but he still didn't know if he could have killed him. He didn't think he could ever kill anybody.

"That's not what Rip and Tear, the witnesses, saw," Bone replied.

"You attack *me* all the time!" Dingo protested.

"That's different."

"Of course it is."

Bone just smirked at him. "The Leader's waiting outside to exile you. You better hurry up and get out there."

"I bet you're just so excited that I'm finally being exiled," Dingo snarled. "Your dream come true: *finally* your idiot brother being sent out of camp."

"My dream was to rule this pack and I got it," he retorted. "You and Claw thought you could stop me from taking over, but both of you failed miserably. Now all that's left to do is kill you after you've been exiled and I'll have gotten everything I want."

Dingo looked down. "Fine, Bone. You got what you wanted *again*. You're right; the pack is no place for someone like me."

"Now you're getting the picture. I have to admit, though, it has been fun to watch you suffer over the years."

Dingo looked up with sad brown eyes. "You really hate me. Why? What did I ever do to you?" He shook his head and let out a low growl. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. I never thought I could hate anyone so much, but I despise you for what you did to Claw."

"I bet you do hate me for killing her."

Silence.

Dingo looked up very slowly, stunned that he had come out and said it and in such a casual way.

Dead silence.

Dingo just stared at Bone, unable to believe that he had finally admitted it and that he didn't even feel any remorse about it; he didn't seem to feel *anything* about it except pride. Dingo continued to stare at him with a look of pure horror. "What... did you say?"

Bone shrugged, an evil sneer spreading over his face. "You're going to be exiled, so what does it matter if you know now? You're not a threat

anymore.”

“You’re...you’re admitting it?”

Bone’s sneer grew wider, colder, and his amber eyes grew dark. Speaking very deliberately in a cold, loathing tone, he whispered, “I killed Claw.”

“No...” Dingo’s eyes widened in shock and he let out a stunned gasp. He had always known it, but hearing his thoughts confirmed by Bone, who said it without a hint of guilt as if it didn’t even matter, was something entirely different.

“I did it. I’m glad I did it. And if I had to, I’d do it again,” Bone growled. “And I guess I am doing it again, this time to you.”

“Why?” Dingo choked out.

Bone chuckled darkly. “I always hated Claw, and she was always a thorn in my side. She stood in the way of me getting what I wanted—total control of the pack—and even when I got it she was still a threat. She knew things about me and about what I did, incriminating things, and she had to be dealt with.” He paused and his eyes gleamed as he smiled a wild, manic smile. “But even before she knew things, I tried to kill her. It was sort of a test-run, to see if I could really do it. You know, kill dingoes. And I picked her as my practice victim because it would hurt you, Dingo. There’s no one I hate more than you and I wanted you to suffer.

“Unfortunately, it was harder to kill her than I thought, so you can be sure she suffered a lot before she finally died. Remember when she disappeared one day then came back at night all bloody? That was my doing. Remember how miserable she was in the last weeks of her life? That was me, too. She might not have told you the incriminating things she knew about me since she wanted to protect you, but in case she did, I have to kill you.” He grinned. “And so you finally know the truth. Too bad it won’t do you any good now.”

Dingo was shaking in fury; he couldn’t control it. “You killed her... just to hurt me?” A furious snarl ripped out of his throat and his brown eyes blazed with fury. “How could you?” he shouted. “Do you know how much I loved her? She was strong and brave and courageous and she never hurt anyone! And you—you just destroyed everything, you monster!” Before Bone had a chance to react, Dingo lunged at him as a ferocious, guttural snarl tore out of his chest.

Bone growled in surprise and shoved Dingo away, but still fell to the ground. Both of them picked themselves up and leapt at each other again in the small den. Dingo's claws dug a deep wound across Bone's face before Bone yanked his leg out from underneath him. Dingo caught himself before he could fall, not even noticing the blood spurting out of his leg in such a blind fury. Bone bared his fangs and lunged for his throat, but Dingo didn't even try to duck; he just threw him away.

Bone's eyes widened in surprise as he stumbled backward and Dingo jumped onto him, slamming his back against the ground. "Murderer!" he shouted. Bone howled in fury and kicked him away before pulling himself up and lunging at Dingo. Dingo dodged out of the way and leapt onto Bone's shoulders, digging his claws in as hard as he could. Bone reared back and threw Dingo to the ground, temporarily knocking the breath out of him.

Letting out a low, dangerous snarl, Bone leapt toward Dingo, his amber eyes glinting with hate in the dim light. Dingo let out a sharp howl as Bone's claws tore into his shoulders, pushing his back onto the cold, gritty floor of the den. Dingo's eyes widened in horror as Bone lunged forward, a dark growl rumbling dangerously in his throat. A rush of anguish and terror shot up his spine as Dingo threw back his head. He squeezed his eyes shut as a loud howl tore out of his chest, scraping his throat raw. Blood seeped out of his neck and spilled onto the floor as Bone buried his fangs into Dingo's throat, his blood-soaked claws practically shaking with rage.

Gasping in horror, Dingo's eyes opened wide as his life began to slip away, their light brown depths seeming to grow dimmer by the minute. Suddenly he squeezed his eyes shut tight and gritted his teeth as new strength flowed to his weak limbs. With a furious snarl, he ripped his paws away from Bone and dug his claws into his brother's belly as hard as he possibly could, knowing his life depended on it. Bone drew back with a sharp yelp as dark blood oozed from his yellow fangs. He whirled around to glare at Dingo, but before he could attack, Dingo drew back his paw and smacked him across the face, digging five deep, bloody trails across Bone's muzzle.

Leaping back with a yelp, Bone stumbled away from him, desperately trying to blink the blood out of his eyes. Dingo leapt to his paws

in an instant and bared his fangs, ignoring the dark blood dripping from his throat.

Both of them lunged at each other, letting out hateful snarls and going at each other with teeth and claws. Bone's gory fangs broke through his skin several times, but Dingo didn't even feel it. Neither of them were really aware of the sticky blood dripping down their legs and spilling onto the ground; they were too caught up in the vicious fight to care about anything besides hurting the other. Dingo's vision was almost red, not just from the blood dripping past his eyes, but from the surge of fury that rose every time he struck a blow. He thought he heard sounds of alarm and confusion from outside when the pack members heard their howling, but it sounded very far away. All he could concentrate on was what Bone had said and on making him pay for it.

Suddenly Bone dodged to the side and rammed Dingo up against the wall of the den with a low, dangerous snarl. Dingo let out a howl of pain and fury as he struggled to get free.

Bone just sneered. "Go ahead and hate me and think I'm the bad guy," he whispered, his voice so low Dingo could barely hear him. "But you're the one that let her go out into the desert alone that night where anyone, not just me, could hurt her. You're the one that broke one of your promises to take care of her and protect her. Part of it's your fault and you know it."

Dingo's eyes widened in dismay and he felt the fight go out of him. He winced as he was crushed up against the wall, panting from the ferocity of the fight and flinching when Bone's claws dug deeper into his flesh. His eyes were suddenly dull with pain and sadness as he stared lifelessly into his brother's gleaming amber eyes. Bone was right; there was no denying it. Dingo closed his eyes with a weak shudder then opened them again as a furious light blazed into them. Maybe he should have done a better job of looking after Claw, but that didn't matter now. Dingo wasn't the one who had left her bleeding in the sand. *'I did it. I'm glad I did it. And if I had to, I'd do it again.'* Bone had been the one who had hurt Claw over and over again; he had been the one that had ruined both his and Claw's lives and he had to pay. Dingo wasn't going to let Bone get to him and destroy him all over again. He wasn't going to let Bone beat him into the dust again and

have the rest of the pack laugh at him. Not this time. Bone had murdered Claw. Bone had to pay.

In a burst of strength, Dingo shoved Bone away from him and dropped onto his paws, his scarred body practically shaking as he stalked dangerously toward Bone. Bone was on his feet in an instant, lashing his tail as he crept furiously toward Dingo, his eyes narrowing with a dark, deadly glint. With loud, hate-filled snarls, they lunged and locked paws in a vicious fight in the center of the den. Dingo had never felt like he could kill anyone before, but the murderous rage building up inside him was almost too powerful to ignore. Dark amber and light brown eyes blazed with anger and hatred. Dingo almost couldn't understand what was happening; they struck a blow as fast as they could and barely noticed when they got hurt. Before Dingo knew what was happening, they had rolled out of the den and into the middle of the camp, their eyes locked as they tore at the other's fur. They barely heard the gasps of surprise from the dingoes and didn't feel the stunned stares burning into their fur as they fought to get the upper hand.

Dingo feinted left and then plowed into Bone's side, but Bone retaliated and pushed Dingo back. Bone jumped toward him, but Dingo fought back, ducking under the blows and leaving a deep gash across Bone's chest when Bone raked his claws across Dingo's face. Bone yelped as blood dribbled out of his chest, but Dingo was barely even aware of his brother's attack, moving so fast he couldn't even think. He was depending solely on instinct and what he'd been taught.

He scored a jagged wound across Bone's shoulder then dodged and leapt behind him; as expected, Bone twisted around to meet his attack, but Dingo suddenly slammed all of his weight down onto Bone's leg. He heard a snap and the sound of Bone's howl of pain before he rammed into Bone's side to unbalance him. Dingo let out a snarl as his claws dug into Bone's shoulders, forcing him down and pinning him to the ground.

The camp had gone deathly silent as Dingo held Bone down, both of them panting heavily. Dingo could practically hear every dingoes' stunned thought: *Dingo beat Bone?!* Ignoring his own surprise, he shook his head and let out a low, dangerous growl as he pushed his brother into the sand. "I should kill you," he panted.

Blood trickled down Bone's face. His eyes squeezed shut as his chest heaved with deep, heavy pants, but slowly he turned to look up into

Dingo's eyes, his own amber eyes blazing with anger and hatred. His lips curled up into a grisly sneer. "Go ahead," he invited. "I dare you, Dingo. Kill me. Right here in camp in front of all these witnesses who've all wanted to kill you since you were born."

Panting and shaking with rage, Dingo snarled in a voice he barely recognized, "I don't care about them. I don't care if they kill me. I can get away if I have to."

"Go ahead then." Bone paused and leered at him. "Then you'll be just like me."

Dingo's dark snarling abruptly cut off as he stared down at Bone, his fiery gaze turning to one of horror. His eyes widened when he met his brother's sneering gaze and his limbs froze with shock and dismay as Bone's words slowly sunk in. Squeezing his eyes shut, he shuddered violently, suddenly feeling weaker than ever. Bone was right; he *would* be just like him and Dingo wouldn't be able to go on if he became just like Bone, just like the dingo who had killed his sister. His breath caught in his throat when he opened his eyes and met Bone's cruel gaze, feeling suddenly scared and lost as he stared into their dark amber depths. Bone smirked up at Dingo. "Go ahead and kill me," he whispered. "I dare you."

Dingo shivered, not sure what he should do or what he *could* do. His eyes widened with fear as he struggled to make a decision. His fur bristled and he was suddenly aware of all of the pack members staring at him, their eyes burning into his skin and setting his fur aflame with discomfort. Dingo stared into Bone's eyes, into his cold, remorseless amber irises. This was Bone, the one he hated, the one who tried to kill him just moments ago. This was his sister's murderer.

Dingo's eyes narrowed as new rage surged through his body. His tail lashed with fury as he let out a low snarl and leaned closer to Bone. Bone met his stare unflinchingly, the corners of his lips turning up to reveal his bloody fangs in a cruel sneer. Dingo narrowed his eyes, practically shaking with hatred as he leaned closer to Bone and bared his fangs. Just one bite. That was all it would take to wipe that smirk off of Bone's face. To avenge his sister's death. To *win*. Just...one...bite...

For a moment, he growled furiously, leaning closer and trying to force himself to kill him, but then he pulled back, shaking his head in

disgust. He already knew he couldn't do it. With a low growl, he looked down and whispered, "I will never *be like you!*"

Bone's eyes gleamed in triumph. Before Dingo knew what had happened, Bone had thrown him to the side as easily as he would a bothersome fly. Dingo landed on the ground with a loud thud and didn't bother to get up. As his head slammed against the desert floor and sand stung his deep, sticky wounds, he tried desperately to blink away salty tears of pain and defeat. Heaving a long, shuddering sigh, he let his tail flop uselessly to the ground. He didn't feel strong enough to pick himself up again.

Wincing, Dingo squeezed his eyes shut and tried to suppress a shiver. How stupid he had been to think he could actually stand up to Bone and fight him. *Kill* him. He could never be like that and he would always lose because of that. But losing was better than becoming the dingo he hated.

"Get up, Dingo."

At the sound of the pack Leader's low growl, Dingo let out a defeated sigh and thought about disobeying him, but he already knew that would just get him killed. With his last bit of strength, Dingo heaved himself to his paws and limped numbly into his den, knowing he was about to be exiled. He couldn't avoid it, and once he had gotten Claw's ribbon and journal, he padded listlessly back out into the camp with a sad, resigned look in his eyes. He felt lower than ever, but he forced himself to pad into the center of the clearing with his head up, telling himself to at least go out with some dignity.

Bone growled at him as he passed Dingo to take his usual place beside the Leader in the center of the camp, acting as Dagger's loyal Second in Command. Dingo stood before the both of them, surrounded by all the pack members who were watching him with shocked, angry, and taunting expressions. Dingo ignored them all and just turned to face the Leader. "I guess I'm an outcast now, right, Dagger?"

The Leader nodded with a cold glint in his yellow gaze. Beside him, Bone's amber eyes glittered victoriously. Dagger raised his voice to announce, "Dingo, you are exiled. Leave this camp and never come back. If any member of the pack sees you, they will kill you. Now get out of my sight, you despicable creature."



Dingo hung his head, narrowing his eyes and bracing himself for the pain and the fear he expected. Oddly, there was none. All there was was a depressing sense of failure and resignation. He hesitated for a long moment and then slowly raised his head to look at Bone, all of the fury gone from his dull, weary gaze. Bone was still his older brother and now, after all the taunting and fighting, Bone was getting what he wanted *again*.

Dingo stared at him for a long time. "I guess you win, Bone."

Bone grinned. "I always do."

Dingo winced, but all he could feel was sadness and emptiness. He looked at Bone for one more moment before his gaze swept the rest of the camp, pausing on his other brothers, Rip and Tear, and taking in their hard, emotionless expressions. After staring at them a moment longer, he glanced back to Bone and Dagger and slowly pushed himself to his paws. Turning away from them, he began walking silently down the line of dingoes surrounding him with his head high, as if he didn't have anything to be ashamed of, as if he hadn't failed again. When he reached the end of the line at the camp's entrance, he raced off into the desert at top speed and never once looked back.

Saderia let out a long sigh and sunk to the ground. Her eyes slipped shut as the sun beat down on her scarred back. Slowly she opened her eyes and stared down at the gritty land below her, tracing tiny patterns in the sand. Her eyes clouded with confusion and wonder as her thoughts turned to the strange dingoes that had attacked them and an image of the brown dingo that saved them burned in her mind. His shadowed light brown eyes flashed before her eyes, making her heart skip a beat as her Dreams flashed through her mind.

She winced when she remembered the bloody wounds that covered his sides when he had fought with the darker dingo. She felt a tingle of unease as she wondered if he was all right. Her gaze turned to the sky as she thought about the dingoes. Why had the brown one fought with the dark one to protect them when he didn't even know them? Why had the two dingoes seemed to hate each other so much? And had she been right to run away when the dingoes had seemed so intent on killing each other?

Shuddering, she tried to push the thought out of her head as she stared up at the sky. She winced and put her paw over her stomach when it

let out a loud growl, feeling a tingle of apprehension and unease. She hadn't noticed in the fight, but after she and Dash had escaped she had realized that somehow they had left their packs of food behind. Going back to get them was out of the question because the dingoes might still be around to hurt them and because she wasn't even sure which way to go; their frantic escape had only gotten them even more lost than before. So they were lost, hurt, and out of food. In a desert. Alone.

Struggling not to panic, she tried to think back, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't recall seeing *anything* that she could eat. The desert was completely empty. There were no fruit trees, no berry bushes... nothing.

"Saderia..."

She blinked and looked up when Dash's voice broke through her fearful thoughts.

His anxious amber eyes bored into hers. "Saderia, we're starving and we left our food behind. What are we going to do?"

Saderia let out a long, slow sigh, trying to calm the rapid beating of her heart. "I...I don't know," she murmured. "Just don't panic."

Dash gaped at her. "Don't panic? We're going to die out here if we don't have food! How can I not panic?"

Saderia gave him a stern glance. "Calm down, Dash. Just give me a moment. I'll think of something." She paused and turned away from him, trying to hide the unease in her eyes as she added the last part in her mind: '*I hope.*'

Closing her eyes, she tried to listen to her instinct, hoping that her Dream sense might actually help her this time instead of giving her two different alternatives. Trying to ignore her fear, she struggled to find some source of food in the desert, silently begging her Dream sense to point her in the right direction. After what felt like ages, she finally felt a tiny tug in a certain direction and felt a rush of relief when she realized there was only one this time.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Follow me," she called to Dash as she bounded forward, her tail swishing hopefully back and forth.

Dash rapidly chased after her until he fell into step beside her, watching her curiously out of the corner of his eye. "Are you using your Dream sense?" he asked.

She nodded. "I tried to use it to find food and now it's like there's something pulling me toward it. There's got to be some source of food around here somewhere."

Dash grinned. "That's great!"

Saderia just smiled back, her gaze focused on the sand in front of her. Her paws prickled with anticipation as she paced forward, concentrating hard to detect the tiny tug pulling her in what she hoped was the right direction. She led the way carefully over sand dunes, her eyes never leaving the ground.

When the tug became stronger, she looked up eagerly, only to freeze when her hopes plummeted. Blinking rapidly, she stared in shock at nothing but empty desert broken only by a single spiky cactus standing right in front of them.

Dash stared at it in shock. "Your Dream sense wants us to eat a cactus?"

Saderia blinked and stared at the cactus, wincing involuntarily when her gaze trailed over the huge, sharp spikes jutting out of it. "Um..."

"Is this really where your Dream sense led us?" Dash exclaimed.

Saderia glanced around anxiously. "I...think so."

He blinked in disbelief. "Saderia, that thing has spikes. Eating sand would be better than that—at least it wouldn't kill me. Why would your Dream sense lead us here?"

Saderia frowned and didn't respond. She paused, feeling a tingle of confusion when her instinct continued to guide her toward the cactus. After a brief hesitation, she slowly stepped forward and began circling the plant, examining it for any hint of food. "Maybe there's food...inside it," she said. "Maybe if we cut it open, there will be something we can eat in it or at least something we can survive on for a while."

Dash curled his lip. "Are you sure your instinct's not just...faulty? I mean, it is hot out here..."

Saderia rolled her eyes. "It wouldn't lead me here for no reason, Dash. There's something about this cactus that will help us."

"Okay." He narrowed his eyes and stared at the cactus. "So if there's something inside it...how do we get it?"

Saderia shrugged. "I guess we have to cut it open."

"...And how do we do that?"

“We have sharp claws,” she reminded him flatly.

“And that thing has sharp spikes,” he retorted.

“And you’re afraid of a tiny little poke after battling those dingoes?”

Saderia replied, narrowing her eyes. “Would you rather starve instead?”

Dash sighed. “Good point.” He paused. “So...are you waiting for *me* to cut it open?”

Saderia rolled her eyes. “Oh, for goodness sake! I’ll do it!”

Dash let out a long breath as he quickly held out a paw to stop her. “No, I’ll do it,” he muttered more seriously, giving her an apologetic glance. Before Saderia could protest, he flicked her lightly with his tail. “Don’t worry about it, Saderia. Let’s just get it over with.”

“Okay,” she murmured, stepping back and watching him carefully.

Dash let out a slow sigh as he stepped closer to the cactus, inspecting it carefully with his eyes to try to find a place to cut it without getting stabbed. When he found the safest spot he could, he took a deep breath, unsheathed his claws and rapidly flashed them across the cactus. Saderia winced when he let out a sharp cry and grabbed his paw. Dash’s eyes narrowed as he pulled two large spikes out of his bleeding paw pad. He painfully rubbed his bloody paw before reluctantly placing it against the ground and wincing when the sand stung the wound.

“Are you okay?” Saderia asked as she cautiously stepped forward.

Dash nodded meekly. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He paused and looked up then blinked in surprise when his eyes caught on the cactus.

Saderia turned to see what had caught his attention and stopped in surprise when she saw a strange liquid drip out of the gash Dash had made in the cactus.

Dash’s eyes widened in surprise. “Maybe that’s what your Dream sense was telling us about. Do...do you think we should drink it?”

Saderia hesitated for a long moment. “I don’t see why not,” she said. “We don’t really have any other option out here.”

“I guess you’re right,” Dash murmured. He paused then slowly padded closer to the cactus beside Saderia.

They watched the liquid drip onto the sand below before slowly leaning forward, getting their heads as close to the spiky cactus as they dared. As the liquid dripped steadily down from the opening in the cactus,

Saderia and Dash held out their tongues to catch it. Both of them winced and drew back when it seeped into their mouths.

“That’s disgusting,” Dash exclaimed, curling his lip.

Hiding a shiver of disgust, Saderia just sighed. “I know, but we have no other option. Now come on. Let’s drink as much of this as we can and then take a break.”

“Fine,” Dash muttered. He shuddered in disgust when he leaned forward to catch as much of it as he could on his tongue.

Saderia closed her eyes and tried to ignore the horrible taste as she drank as much of it as she could, knowing it was her only hope for survival.

When at last they had managed to drink enough to satisfy their hunger and keep them alive, they padded anxiously away from the cactus and collapsed onto the sand. Trying not to wince when the sand stung her wounds, Saderia slowly rested her head against the ground, a long sigh escaping her throat. Dash’s paw brushed against hers as he sank down beside her, resting his head against his paws and glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

After several moments of silence, Saderia slowly rested her muzzle on her paws and let herself stare out at the vast nothingness of the desert around her. “Do you remember how the dingoes acted?” she murmured.

Dash glanced up at her and raised an eyebrow. “They attacked us.”

“I didn’t mean that,” Saderia replied with a roll of her eyes. “I meant...how they acted toward each other.” Her eyes glittered in the sunlight. “I know they’re dangerous, Dash, but I can’t help but wonder about them. The world seems so vast now that we’ve left the forest behind and I keep wondering about the dingoes and what kind of life they have here. I mean, is their life kind of like ours was in the forest with Kings and Queens and stuff? Or do they have their own society and hierarchy?” She thought carefully. “When those dogs attacked us, almost all of them seemed to be following the orders of that dark brown dingo. Maybe he’s like the King or something.”

“He didn’t look old enough to be King.”

“Well, maybe he’s a Prince then, like you are,” she replied. “Or maybe they have some other kind of class system.”

Dash glanced at her. “Does it matter?”

“I don’t know,” Saderia murmured. “I keep thinking about them and I just can’t stop wondering what they’re all like. I mean, they seem so violent, but maybe that’s just the way their life is.” She paused. “I think my Dreams have been telling me to get to know them more, so they must be important. If they weren’t, why would almost all of my Dreams be about the desert?” Thinking back to her nightmares, she added, “Remember how one of my Dreams said something about something called ‘the pack’? Maybe that’s what the dingoes call themselves—like how we call the animals of the forest collectively ‘the kingdom’ or ‘the forest’. That’s just one thing I’ve learned about them so far. My Dreams have been urging me to learn as much about them as possible. Maybe they even want me to help them.”

Dash frowned. “Help them? Saderia, they want to eat us. They call us food.”

“I know, but I don’t think all of them are bad. Like that brown one. He saved us!”

“That *was* surprising,” Dash replied. “And he did seem kind of nice, but he’s gone now and he’s a dingo so...”

“I don’t think we should judge him just because he’s a dingo,” Saderia snapped. “That’s like saying I’m prissy because I’m a Princess or you’re evil because you’re Dastarius’s son.”

Dash looked down. “You’re right. We shouldn’t judge him. I’m sorry.”

Saderia sighed, her sharp amber gaze turning thoughtful again as she looked out across the desert. “There’s something special about him. Just think about it. The blackish one was obviously in charge and out of the three dingoes he commanded, the brown one was the only one that stood up to him. He didn’t want to attack us like the red one and the orange one did and he saved us even though he didn’t know us.”

Dash nodded slowly. “I know he helped us, Saderia, but he’s gone now. Why are you so interested in him?”

Saderia paused. “Did you get a good look at him?” she whispered. “At his eyes...?”

“No...”

“They were brown. Light brown.”

Dash’s eyes widened. “You mean...?”

“Yes,” Saderia said, a smile spreading across her face. “I recognized his voice from my Dreams. I think he is the brown-eyed dog from my Dreams.”

Dash stared at her in surprise. “Really? The one that always seemed to want to help you?”

Saderia nodded. “That’s not all. Do you remember when he and the darker one were fighting? Did you hear what they were saying?” When Dash shook his head, Saderia explained, “They were talking about that name I kept hearing in my Dreams—Claw. Do you remember me telling you about my third Dream? Just before the brown dog and the blackish dog started fighting, I heard them saying the exact same things I heard in the Dream. They even fought afterward just like in my Dream.”

Dash’s eyes widened with shock. “So they’re all starting to come true?”

Saderia grinned. “Exactly. Since my Dreams are starting to come true, I have a feeling we’ll eventually get to know a lot more about the desert. The more we know about this place, the easier it will be to survive and find a way out of it.”

“We *have* figured out a lot of things so far,” Dash said thoughtfully. “Like the thing about the cactuses and what those dogs are actually called. We’ve already been out here for a long time, so sooner or later we’re bound to find something to help us, if not a way out of this desert.”

“That’s the spirit!” Saderia exclaimed. “We’ve already survived for six days out here and we can keep on surviving until we get out of this place. Maybe that brown-eyed dog will help us.” She paused to think before smiling a wide, eager smile. “I think his name is Dingo.”

# Chapter Eighteen

## Desert Hardships

Amber eyes blinked open into deep, impenetrable darkness, their gleaming depths widening in fear as a faint hissing sound whispered through the blackness. Saderia tried to turn to locate the sound, but found herself falling to the ground instead, her paws struggling against tight bonds. Her heart beat faster with fear as the hissing grew louder. A sharp flash of light sliced through the darkness, making her freeze when she saw nothing but sharp, pointed fangs all around her.

Her mouth opened in a scream of terror as she fought to leap to her paws, thrashing desperately against the tight restraints tied around her. She let out a gasp of shock when gruff laughter reached her ears. Her eyes widened with terror when she felt something sharp dig into her leg and she shivered with terror when pain raced up her spine. Thrashing viciously, she struggled to get away, only to let out a cry of pain when more sharp fangs pierced her skin. She let out a desperate cry for help when she saw something light above her and made out a dark silhouette against the distant light. Her eyes widened with hope, but before the shadow could help her, something dark loomed over her and struck her hard on her forehead, plunging her into nothing but fear and blackness.

The raw terror lasted even as she jolted away and stared out at the sunny desert around her, feeling just as frightened as she had in the darkness of her Dream as she wondered what her Dream sense was warning her about this time.

A soft sigh escaped Makero's throat as he shifted a dirty yellow strap through his paws. His tail flicked anxiously back and forth as he slowly lifted the yellow pack up to his face and stared hopelessly at the rotten fruit stuffed inside it. After a week and two days of searching, after struggling so hard to fight the heat and find his children, the only thing he had found were their food packs.



Abandoned.

He had searched for hours around the spot where he had found them, calling their names and feeling his hopes plummet every time he was met only with silence. Afterward, he had been forced to move on, but he hadn't been able to keep them out of his mind. Why would Saderia and Dash leave their only source of food behind...unless they had been forced to? Grisly images of his children being ripped apart by those strange dogs filled his mind. Had they been attacked? If they had, had they survived? His mind whirled with confusion and fear. Even if they had survived, had they found some other source of food or were they starving and weak?

Makero let out a groan before he slowly pulled himself to his paws and started walking, trying to tell himself that Saderia and Dash had survived. His tired green eyes hopelessly scanned the horizon for any sign of his children. Feeling a tingle of disappointment, he slowly looked down then froze when he looked up again. His eyes stretched wide with shock when he saw a splash of orange against the yellow brown sand. Without thinking, he opened his mouth to call out his daughter's name, but before he could find his voice, a loud, familiar voice echoed through the desert.

"Makero!"

Makero gaped in disbelief as the orange tiger raced forward, her amber eyes blazing with determination and relief. He stared at her in shock as she darted closer and skidded to a sharp halt in front of him.

"Karenisha?!"

The Queen gave him a relieved smile as her sides heaved with pants. "Makero," she gasped. "I...I've been looking all over for you!"

"Calm down," he exclaimed, darting forward to press a paw up against her shoulder. "Take a minute to catch your breath!"

"Sorry," she panted, gazing anxiously at the sandy floor. After a few moments, she looked back up at him, her amber eyes shining with excitement. "I can't believe I found you! I've been looking for you for days!"

"Why?" Makero exclaimed, his green eyes wide with dismay. "You shouldn't have left the group to look for me! It's dangerous out here!" He paused. "How did you even know I was missing?"

Karenisha flicked him softly with her tail, her amber gaze growing solemn. "Makero, you don't understand. I didn't leave the group—I got

them to a safe place first. All of us—not just my group, but yours and Cia and Jash’s group—found a great place to stay. I met Maeta there and she told me what had happened to you and Saderia and Dash. I told Cia and Jash to stay and help the animals get settled in while I searched for you. I... I had to make sure you were safe.”

Makero blinked. “A safe place? You mean...”

“A forest,” she explained, making Makero’s eyes open wide with shock. “We found it just a few days ago,” she went on. “It’s almost as big as our old one and we’ve decided to stay. It’s our new home.”

Makero gasped. “You actually found a new forest?”

She managed a tight smile as she nodded. “Yes. Everyone seems to be settling in fine even though it is a bit...different from our old forest. I’m sure Cia and Jash can handle investigating the woods while I’m gone and now that I’ve found you, I’ll be able to get back to help them out. It’s basically a straight path from here to the forest, Makero, and I marked the direction the forest was facing every time I went to sleep to make sure I never lost sight of where it was and which direction I was heading.”

“That...that’s great,” Makero stammered.

Karenisha nodded faintly. She paused then added, “Have you... found anything to lead you to Saderia and Dash?”

Makero looked down. “Just their food packs.” He held them up with a look of defeat. “I...I don’t know what happened to them or why they left them behind, but we know that Saderia and Dash are tough enough to survive. Saderia has her Dream sense and Dash can fight to protect her...” He trailed off with a sigh; trying to convince himself of what he hoped to be true was only making it worse.

Karenisha glanced at her paws. “I’m sure you’re right,” she murmured.

Makero just nodded as he turned his gaze up to the sky. “You should probably get back to the new forest,” he said softly. “You’ve found me and told me how to get there and the kingdom needs their Queen to look after them.”

Karenisha sighed. “You’re right.” She turned to look behind her before glancing back at Makero. “I guess I should go. Just be careful out here. Make sure you aren’t seen by those strange dogs and try to hold on to the food you brought.”

“All right,” Makero replied. “Thank you, Karenisha.”

“You’re welcome,” she murmured, stepping closer to press her cheek up against his. “Goodbye.” She let out a sigh as she stepped back, smiling weakly at the King before turning and reluctantly beginning to walk back in the direction she had come, her tail dragging against the ground. Her sad amber eyes caught his one last time before she began bounding off into the sand dunes.

“Goodbye,” Makero murmured as she disappeared behind a dune. He sighed and glanced out at the desert, his green eyes burning with determination. As the sun glistened blindingly in the sky, he slowly stepped forward and dug a noticeable hole into the sand to mark the direction of the new forest. After glancing at the marker and up at the sky once more, he took a deep breath and slowly began moving forward, determined to find Saderia and Dash before it was too late.

Sand whipped across her face, stinging her eyes as she squinted to see through the desert. Saderia’s paws shuffled heavily through the sand as she struggled to keep moving. Her eyes narrowed in a desperate attempt to see the land in front of her. Sharp winds brushed across her face, lashing her long orange fur back and forth. Yellow brown winds of sand rustled her fur, pushing her back when she tried to move forward.

Her Dream flashed through her mind as she struggled to keep moving, bringing with it a deep sense of dread. Apart from the attack by the dingoes, nothing truly awful had happened to her and Dash after a week and two days of traveling. Was that unstable sense of peace about to end?

Grimacing and spitting out a mouthful of disgusting sand, she squinted to see through the lashing winds and felt a shiver of unease when she realized it was getting harder to make out the blue sky above them. Shivering, she forced herself to move forward and ignore the sandy wind around them. Her eyes narrowed to slits when the sand grew thicker and tiny grains stung her eyes.

“Saderia...”

Saderia blinked and whirled around to stare at Dash. She narrowed her eyes in confusion when she read the fear in his gaze.

Dash’s dark brown mane whipped wildly back and forth as he pointed forward. “What is that?”

Frowning, Saderia turned to squint through the rapid winds. Her eyes widened and a sharp gasp tore out of her throat when her eyes pierced through the sandy winds and she saw what lay ahead.

An enormous brown wall of sand slowly drifted toward them, covering the sky with huge clouds of dust and towering high above the ground. Saderia looked up slowly as the dull brown clouds of dust reached across the sky, drawing closer and closer to them by the minute. Looking frantically from side to side, she realized it seemed to spread out in all directions, wrapping around them as if trying to trap them. Her tail flicked anxiously back and forth as she glanced back in the direction she had come before turning around to face the threatening cloud of sand.

"I...I think it's a sandstorm," she replied, trying not to wince when a harsh wind blew sand into her mouth.

Dash stared dubiously at the ominous dusty brown cloud. "What do we do? Do we turn back or...try to get through it?"

Saderia bit her lip. "I don't know." When she gazed back, she frowned at the thought of having to backtrack and ruin all their progress—assuming they were going the right way to begin with. But when she faced the sandstorm, a deep sense of unease overwhelmed her and left her feeling cold with nervousness. She turned back to Dash. "It can't be that bad, can it? I mean, it's just sand."

Dash glanced uneasily at the large cloud. "I don't know, Saderia..."

"It just seems like such a waste to go back after we've come so far!"

Dash frowned anxiously. "Well...if you really think it's worth it. Does your instinct say we should go in this direction...even with the sandstorm?"

Saderia let out a sigh and glanced nervously up at the sandstorm, her amber eyes narrowing with apprehension. Despite her fear she still felt a distinct tug in that direction, as if her instinct was urging her to go that way. At the same time, she felt a slight pull in the opposite direction. Her heart beat faster with dismay when she realized that once again there were two directions, both of them carrying a dark threat. Her eyes narrowed as her gaze whipped rapidly back and forth between the direction she had just come from and the ominous dark brown cloud blocking the opposite path. At last, she turned to face the threatening sandstorm, her amber eyes

glinting in determination. "It's just sand," she said. "We should keep going."

Dash glanced at her with wide eyes before nervously nodding and turning to face the sandstorm. "Okay."

Saderia took a deep breath, cast one last glance at her best friend, and stepped forward, ducking her head low to avoid the harsh winds whipping across her face. Her tail unconsciously wrapped itself around Dash's as they moved forward. As they drew closer to the sandstorm, Saderia squeezed her mouth shut, folded her ears closer to her head and scrunched up her nose as much as possible, preparing herself for the onslaught of sand.

Ignoring the winds, she quickly moved forward, her gaze locked on the brown cloud. When she finally drew close enough to reach out and touch it, she found herself looking up and feeling a sharp tingle of fear when she realized she could see nothing above her but a tall, threatening wall of dust. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and winced, taken off guard by a sharp lash of gritty wind. Her wounds ached with pain when sand smacked up against her body, but she ignored it and forced herself to keep moving.

Her eyes narrowed as she stepped forward and watched the desert around her slowly grow darker. Squinting to try to see through the thick cloud, she blindly stepped forward, feeling a twinge of fear when the land around her started to blend with the sky. Starting to walk faster, she broke into a slow run, her paws shuffling rapidly across the sandy ground. Thick clumps of sand billowed out behind her before being torn up into the air by a strong gust of wind. The loud roaring noise of wind filled her ears as she drove herself deeper into the dust cloud.

Her heart skipped a beat when she struggled to see through the sandstorm and saw nothing but a dull brown color all around her. She looked up frantically and almost gasped when she saw the dust clouds above her slowly start to cover the shining yellow sun. Turning anxiously to Dash, she flicked her tail rapidly and broke out into a run, determined to get out of the sandy cloud as quick as possible. Wincing when the winds grew stronger and lashed gritty sand against her stinging wounds, she forced herself to move faster and tried not to cry out when a sharp wind made her stumble to the side.

Squinting desperately into the sandstorm, she hoped to see a sliver of light to show her where it ended, but her heart beat faster when she realized the air around her was only getting darker. Peering out around her with eyes of mere slits, she caught a brief glimpse of Dash's terrified face. She whirled around and ran faster, her paws thudding heavily against the ground as her tail streamed out behind her. Sand buffeted into her body from every direction and she had to fight to keep her ears plastered to her head. She struggled to find a way out, but there was nothing but dark sand all around her.

Skidding to an abrupt halt, she just barely managed to suppress a cry of alarm when the sandy cloud drifted over the sun and plunged her entire world into nothing but blackness. Whirling around, she struggled to make out the form of her best friend but only managed to catch sight of two narrowed amber eyes glowing through the darkness. Squeezing his tail with her own, she frantically turned around, searching for any way out of the dark storm. Her heart beat wildly when she realized there was no sliver of light, no yellow brown sand, no blue sky that she could make out through the dark cloud.

Sand stung her eyes, nearly blinding her to the already empty black world around her. Harsh winds buffeted her injured body, coating her blood-covered wounds with a thick, gritty layer of sand. Her paws shuffled frantically on the desert floor, just barely managing to keep her from stumbling when the wind picked up and tossed her carelessly from side to side. She bolted wildly through the dark cloud, forgetting to care about which direction she should follow in her desperation to get out of the darkness. Dash stumbled helplessly after her, refusing to make a sound as the gritty wind stung their eyes and tugged at their fur.

The blackness seemed to go on for ages. After a while, she began to wonder if she was somehow running in circles or if she had somehow fallen into some sort of Dream. Unfortunately, even the darkest, most realistic Dream couldn't match the searing pain of her wounds. Struggling to stay in a straight line, Saderia gritted her teeth against the pain and flew through the cloud, desperate to see the shining light of day.

Her narrowed eyes darted frantically back and forth, searching for any escape from the black void around her. For what seemed like ages, she continued racing through nothing but darkness. The solid ground below her

was the only indication she hadn't disappeared entirely into nothing but an empty vacuum. A sharp sense of hopelessness overcame her, making her wonder if she would ever know anything but pure darkness and stinging sands again. Just when she began to give up and stumble to the ground, her eyes caught sight of a tinge of dark orange.

Her heart leapt as she stared at the light, the only splotch of color in the otherwise empty desert around her. Tugging rapidly on Dash's tail, she led him forward, her paws stumbling over themselves in her haste to be free. The orange light grew stronger and brighter as she raced forward and her heart skipped a beat when the sand around her gradually became less thick. Slowly the winds began to die down. A sharp sandy gust sent her stumbling forward, but she rapidly picked herself up and kept running, afraid that if she hesitated even a moment, the orange light would disappear.

The orange slowly gave way to a bright yellow glow that gradually began to spread out around her. Her eyes opened wide with relief when she started to see the brown line of the horizon, dividing the blue sky from the yellow sand. With a gasp of relief, she finally allowed herself to take a deep breath of fresh air, ignoring the few bits of sand that scraped her throat. Turning to the side, she saw Dash stumble forward with a sigh of relief, his now sandy-colored mane sweeping across his face.

He turned to face her with wide, shocked eyes. His unkempt brown fur stood up in clumps, its normally dark brown color a shade lighter due to the sand sticking to it. His wide amber eyes mirrored the same fear and surprise she knew must be shining in her own stunned gaze. Glancing at the sand covering most of his body, Dash rapidly shook himself to try to get it off, but the sand had tangled and packed itself so thickly into the dirty strands of his fur that the task was impossible.

Looking back, Saderia felt a shiver of fear when she saw the dark brown cloud of dust towering over above them, feeling grateful that she could see it slowly drifting away. Heaving a sigh, she cautiously turned to her best friend. "Are you okay?" she murmured.

Dash glanced back at himself before nodding meekly. "I think so."

Nodding and trying to annoy the irritating itchiness of the sand, she managed a tight smile. "Well...at least we made it out of there."

Dash let out a long, shaky sigh. "Yeah. I was starting to think it would never end." He glanced up at the huge cloud of dust. "How do the

dingoes survive this place?”

Saderia shook her head. “I have no idea. They must have really thin fur, though.” She winced when she thought of her thick, fluffy tail and shivered when she imagined trying to groom all of the sand out of it.

Dash sighed and glanced at the ground.

Frowning, Saderia slowly got to her paws and padded over to him before sitting down and draping her tail over his shoulders. She managed a tight, reassuring smile when he turned to face her.

“We’re going to be okay,” she murmured. “We made it out alive and we’re going the right way. We’ll find a way out of this desert eventually. Now come on. Let’s try to get this stupid sand out of our fur.”

Hours passed by. Saderia’s head slumped down as she struggled to put one paw in front of the other and ignore the pain that shot up her spine at every step. The sun seared their backs and blinded them when they dared glance up at the sky, making Saderia almost wish for the chillier darkness of the dust cloud. Her sand-clogged throat burned with pain every time she tried to take a breath. A low groan escaped her mouth as she struggled onward, hoping only for some source of water. Even the cactus juice would be welcome if it would ease the pain in her throat, but she hadn’t seen one for miles.

With a sigh, she slowly looked up then froze when she caught sight of something strange sitting off in the distance. Stopping to look, she frowned when she made out a sort of dip in the desert sand several feet in front of her. When she paused and looked closer, she was able to make out the gleam of the sun against dark brown rock peeking out from within some of the sand dunes in the distance.

Stopping Dash with a touch of her tail, she briskly pointed toward it, her amber eyes wide with curiosity. “What’s that?” she whispered.

Dash glanced up and blinked in surprise. Squinting to get a better look, he murmured, “I don’t know. It almost looks like some sort of... valley. With a bunch of dark brown rock things in the sand dunes around it.”

Saderia hesitated. “Do you think we should check it out?”

Dash looked at her in alarm. “I guess we can if you really want to... You don’t think there’s anything dangerous in there, though, do you?” “I



can't tell from here," she replied, "but I think we should check it out." She flicked him with her tail as she bounded forward. "Come on!" she called. "Try to keep low to the ground when we get closer. Just in case."

Swallowing uneasily, Dash nodded and slowly fell into step behind her. He crouched down as he walked so that his dark brown belly brushed against the ground. After several moments of creeping along the desert floor, Saderia was just barely able to make out the rough edges of rock peeking out of the side of large sand dunes. The dunes seemed to surround the entire valley and each one seemed to hide the strange dark brown rocks. When she and Dash slipped even closer, she was able to make out the gaping entrance in the rocks and felt herself freeze with apprehension.

"Dash," she hissed, "these things almost look like...dens."

Dash looked up and froze. "Dens? Do you think the dingoes live here?"

Frowning, Saderia peered closer at the strange dens before slowly shaking her head. "I don't know. They might have once, but right now it looks abandoned. I can't see anybody in the dens or anyone roaming around the valley."

"Okay," Dash replied, his eyes narrowed with unease. "Should we keep going?"

Saderia nodded absently. "Yeah, let's go. If we see anything, we'll run."

When Dash agreed, she slowly inched forward, her dirty white belly sweeping across the ground. She made sure to keep her head down as she crept closer, her eyes locked on the valley in front of her. After staring at the dens for several moments, she gradually began to realize that the strange valley truly was abandoned. When she drew closer to it, she cautiously began to stand rather than crawl. Dash immediately followed her example and bounded alongside her. Together, they made their way toward the valley as quickly as they could then paused and gaped in shock when they saw what was sitting just in front of the small sand dune dens.

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm and she skidded to a halt just as she came face to face with two large piles of gleaming white bones. A sharp gasp tore out of her throat as she stared at the bones, feeling sick when she realized how high the piles reached. Swallowing hard, she slowly backed

away from the bones, her wide amber eyes never blinking or looking away from them.

“Saderia...” She whirled around to see Dash staring at the bones in fear and disgust. “Um... maybe we should get out of here?”

Saderia glanced around at the valley and shook her head. “No, Dash. There’s no one here.”

“Can’t you see that?” he exclaimed, gesturing wildly toward the bones. “Don’t you have even the slightest fear that we might end up in that pile if those dingoes come back here?”

“If they come back, we’ll run,” she told him firmly. “Now come on. Let’s look around.”

She stepped forward, trying not to flinch when she passed the pile of bones. Dash slowly shook his head as he fell into step behind her, muttering, “I know you want to get to know the dingoes, Saderia, but is it really worth risking our lives? They use *bones* to mark their creepy valley! You really want to know creatures that do things like that?”

Ignoring him, Saderia leaned down to try to peer into the dark, shadowed depths of the sand dune dens. “Do you think this is some kind of neighborhood?” she mused, staring out at the dozens of dens surrounding the strange valley.

After giving her a slight glare, Dash finally sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know,” he muttered. “Maybe. It has dens.”

Nodding absently, she turned and let her gaze wander around the neighborhood. She frowned when she made out a large rectangular trough made of dull, dark brown rock sitting in the center of the neighborhood. Slipping closer to investigate, her eyes widened in shock when she made out a dull, sand-colored liquid lapping at the sides of the trough. A loud gasp escaped her throat.

“Water!”

Dash looked up sharply. “What? Where?!” he exclaimed.

Saderia darted forward and skidded to a halt just beside the rocky trough. Her eyes stretched wide with surprise when she found herself staring into a large pool of water on the bottom of the hollowed out rock. Dash let out a gasp as he slid to a stop right beside her, his mouth gaping wide with amazement. Without hesitation, they dunked their heads into the water below and immediately began lapping up the warm liquid. Saderia

barely even seemed to notice the hot, stale taste of the water as she greedily drank it down. She found it easy to ignore the tiny grits of sand in it when it quenched the painful fire in her throat.

As soon as she had drank down as much as she could possibly handle, she slowly pulled back, a contented smile on her face. A long sigh escaped her soaked lips as water dripped from her chin, but as she glanced into the musty water, her excitement slowly began to fade. Without meaning to, she found herself staring down at a face she barely recognized as her own.

Dull eyes stared up into her own, their amber depths hollow and bloodshot. Faded, dirty fur stuck out from her body in thick, ragged clumps, her black stripes were dull with sand, and her white belly was stained with dirt. Bright scarlet scars lined her face and body, startling in contrast to the dirty paleness of her fur. Thick clumps of sand stuck to the dried blood splattered across her face and chest. Beside her, she could see the same dismay in the eyes of Dash's reflection. His lighter, thinner mane stuck out in unkempt tufts of hair while ragged wounds lined his face.

Backing away slowly, Saderia carefully turned away from her haggard expression, trying to erase the image of the lifeless gaze she had witnessed from her mind. Her eyes traveled to her paws before sneaking a glance at Dash. Looking away when she saw the despair in his eyes, she slowly turned to scan the dens surrounding them. Her paws suddenly prickled with unease and uncertainty.

"We should go," she murmured.

"Yeah," Dash said quickly. "We probably should get out of here."

Nodding, Saderia turned to face the water trough before silently padding toward the two piles of bones at the entrance of the neighborhood. Her gaze lingered on the bones for a moment longer before she forced herself to turn around. The sun burned brightly in the sky as she and Dash took off into the desert, determined to leave the creepy valley and the ominous dens behind.

Rays of light spread out across the desert as Bone, Rip, and Tear padded to the top of a sand dune and stopped to look out at the desert around them.

"Hey, look," Tear exclaimed. "It's the forest food that got away!"

Bone growled. "I can see that, Tear. And they won't get away this time." He grinned. "On my signal, we attack. What do you think, Rip?"

"I think the Snake Pit's to the left of the forest food," Rip observed.

Bone thought for a moment. "Hey, you're right. All right, I have an idea..."

Saderia's ears pricked up and her paws came to an abrupt halt. Her eyes narrowed as she strained to listen. Tiny, almost inaudible whispers floated over to her ears, raising the hair along her back as she turned to locate the sound. Dash froze and turned to face her, his amber eyes narrowing in confusion until he picked up the distinct sound of cold laughter. His fur beginning to bristle, he opened his mouth to say something, but before he could utter a word, a loud, violent barking broke out behind them.

Whirling around, Saderia let out a scream when she saw three dingoes bound toward them at top speed, their muzzles lifted in a dark, warning howl.

"Run!" she screamed.

Her body twisted in midair as she leapt away from them and took off running. Dash raced after her, his mane streaming wildly out behind him as he fought to keep up. Saderia's eyes opened wide with fear when she heard a dark chuckle behind her and she forced herself to run faster. The rapid thudding of paw steps behind her thundered in her ears, making her heart beat so fast she could hardly feel her chest. Sand flew up behind them, but from the loud snarls behind her, she could tell that it hadn't stopped them. Shivers of fear shot up her spine when she looked back and realized that this time Dingo wasn't there to save them.

Bone's sneering amber eyes glinted in the sunlight as he darted after them, his short dark brown fur almost completely black against the light sand. Rip and Tear raced on either side of him, their red and orange fur gleaming in the bright rays of the sun.

A pang of alarm raced up Saderia's spine as she turned away from them, her breath heaving heavily out of her chest. Her paws slammed against the ground in her haste to get away and her throat burned with the harsh pants shuddering out of her chest. Looking around wildly, her eyes scanned the horizon for some place to hide, but the desert was as barren as

ever. The flat sand dunes around her offered no place for them to dive behind or sneak around to avoid their attackers. Saderia swallowed nervously, hoping desperately that she had the strength to outrun them.

A sharp cry tore out of her throat when a blur of red flashed past her. Saderia let out a cry of alarm when Rip landed in front of her and whirled around to snarl in her face. She struggled frantically to swerve around him. Boldly leaping away, Saderia let out a shriek of fear when she came face to face with Tear and turned sharply to avoid being caught. She felt hot breath on her tail as Bone chased after her, his dark, quiet laughter filling the tense air around her.

Struggling to get away from them, she tried to veer off to the side, but before she could get away, Rip lunged forward and blocked their path. When she tried to leap away in the other direction, Tear rapidly pushed them back. No matter which way she tried to turn, the red and orange dingoes prevented her from escaping.

Looking back frantically, her amber eyes locked on Bone's. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him leap forward and land just a few inches away from her tail. Letting out a cry of alarm, she darted forward as quickly as she could, ignoring the sting of her wounds and the roar of paw steps all around her. Her gaze turned rapidly to Rip as he leapt forward and ran just a few inches behind them, seeming to follow their exact movement with hungry yellow eyes. On her other side, Tear struggled to keep up the same pace as Rip as he raced almost alongside them. Her eyes stretched wide with fear when her gaze locked on Bone's face and his shadowed eyes stared coldly back into hers.

"Saderia, look out!"

Dash's sharp shout tore her out of her fearful haze. Whirling around, she let out a gasp of fear and slammed her paws into the sand in a desperate attempt to stop herself. Her heart stopped in her chest when she skidded to an abrupt halt right on the edge of a huge, black chasm. A shudder of terror surged through her body when a pinch of sand sprinkled off into the chasm and disappeared into the darkness before her eyes. Her paws teetered on the edge and every hair on her back stood on end as she gazed down into the pitch black abyss, never daring to blink or even breathe.

She whirled around when sharp laughter filled the air and let out a silent gasp when Bone, Rip, and Tear stalked toward them. They stopped

just a few inches away from them and spread out around them, blocking their every exit. Saderia narrowed her eyes as Bone stepped forward, her tail lashing furiously back and forth.

A cold grin spread across his face. "Well, tiger, looks like you're cornered."

Saderia let out a sharp hiss of fury. "Where are we?" she demanded.

"The most dangerous place in the desert," Rip snickered.

A shiver of fear raced up her spine. Glancing anxiously around at the three dingoes, a dark sense of fear and foreboding settled over her.

"Where's Dingo?" she growled, trying to hide the fear in her voice.

Tear's ears perked up. "Have you seen him?"

"Yeah, we're trying to hunt him down," Rip added.

Bone smacked them both over the head. "Would you two shut up?" he snarled. "Do you always go around telling forest food what we do?"

Rip just rolled his eyes as Saderia's heart skipped a beat.

"Why?" she exclaimed. "What did you do to him?"

Dash glanced at her urgently out of the corner of his eye. "Saderia, we have bigger problems right now," he hissed.

"You should listen to the lion, tiger," Bone growled. "Why would you care about Dingo anyway?"

Saderia's fur fluffed out in warning and she ignored his question.

"What are you going to do to us?" she demanded.

Bone snorted. "Well, we're going to try to kill you, tiger. Now here are your options: you can either stay up here and be killed by us or jump into that chasm and see what happens to you down there."

Saderia narrowed her eyes, but couldn't resist the urge to look back at the chasm. A wave of dizziness and fear washed over her when she saw the end of her paw hanging just over the edge of the abyss. Trying to shake it off, she whirled around to face Bone and let out a growl. "What happens in that chasm?"

Bone just laughed. "If you're really stupid enough to jump, then I'll let you find out for yourselves."

"And why shouldn't I jump if you three are just going to tear us to shreds anyway?" she snapped, glancing around desperately as she stalled for time.

Rip let out a humorless laugh. "You'd have to be suicidal to jump off."

"Yeah, no one is tough enough to survive that place," Tear growled. He paused then added more thoughtfully, "But I guess you haven't heard the stories." A deep shudder ran through his body.

"Stories?" Saderia demanded.

"I suppose they haven't," Bone interrupted, sending a glare at his minions. A sneer tugged at his lips. "In that case, maybe they should jump so they can find out for themselves."

Rip and Tear let out a chuckle as they crept closer, their yellow eyes glowing in excitement. Saderia braced herself, but when she looked back and found herself on the very edge of the chasm, a flash of hopelessness raced through her body. She looked up desperately.

"Wait!" she cried. "Don't do this!"

Bone licked his lips. "Attack!"

Almost instantly, Rip and Tear leapt forward and dragged them away from the edge of the abyss, letting out low, threatening snarls. Saderia let out a cry of pain when Rip's fangs tore into her skin and blood splattered the ground. Her leg burned with pain when she yanked it out of Rip's grasp and swiped back at him with her claws, her amber eyes blazing with fury. Beside her, she heard Dash let out a growl when he pulled himself away from Tear and leapt at the orange dingo with all of his might.

Whirling around at the sound of a dark snarl, she let out a cry of alarm when Bone lunged toward her, his long, yellow fangs tearing into her skin. A scream tore out of her throat as she yanked herself away from him; she winced when blood welled up in her neck. A sharp, painful blow to her side sent her sprawling backwards when she tried to turn around. Without warning, she found herself teetering on the edge of the chasm. A gasp escaped her throat before she closed her eyes and leapt away from the edge as fast as she could. She felt her heart stop when she dared look back and saw thick clumps of earth fall into the pit.

She whipped around at the sound of a loud, painful snarl just in time to see Tear shove Dash aside. Her heart froze until she saw Dash pick himself up and throw Tear away from him, his amber eyes narrowed in a dark glare. With a sharp gasp of hope, she struggled to race toward Dash to escape, but before she could get close, razor-sharp teeth dug into her back

leg. Pain raced up her spine and she let out a scream when she lost her footing and smacked against the ground. Before she could protest, she felt a sharp sting across her belly when her attacker dragged her across the sand.

Using the last bit of her strength, she forced herself to whirl around and lashed out with her claws. Rip let out a yelp of pain and released her leg as blood dripped from his dark red face. Her paws scrabbled wildly against the sand as she struggled to stand, but when she finally stumbled to her paws, she found herself staring directly into Bone's cold amber eyes. She let out a gasp as a dark sneer spread across his face and he lashed out with his claws. Saderia ducked just in time to avoid him and lunged forward to rake her claws across his face. Bone drew back with a cold snarl before leaping forward and pinning her to the ground. His claws sunk deep into her shoulders, but before he could lunge forward to bite her throat, she kicked him hard in the belly and tore her claws across his chest, spattering her own white chest red with drops of blood.

Bone reared back with a yelp of pain as Saderia struggled to her paws. She leapt to her feet and turned to face her enemies, but before she could prepare for any attack, Rip slammed into her, knocking her to the ground. Rolling onto her back, she tore at his shoulder with her claws and kicked him away. Rip stumbled back with a pained howl, but before she could try to stand, bloody fangs tore into her leg once again. Letting out a scream and struggling against her attacker, she whirled around just in time to see Bone's glowing amber eyes.

Before she could protest, Bone grabbed her leg and swung her across the sand before hurling her into the air. Saderia let out a scream of alarm as she flew forward. Her claws reached out wildly, but before she could grab onto something, her body slammed into the ground on the side of the abyss. Pain exploded in her back as she tried to turn to grab onto something. Her paws reached out desperately for some kind of hold. A scream tore out of her throat when she felt the solid ground beneath her disappear. The last thing she saw was Bone's dark, sneering eyes before her vision turned black and she found herself hurtling into the darkness.

Saderia let out a shriek as she plummeted downward, her body twisting violently in midair. Her claws swiped blindly at the dark air around her, desperate for something to hold onto, but there was nothing around her but blackness and open air. Her eyes stretched wide with horror when she



looked up and saw the light world above her disappear in a blur of darkness and fear. Her gaze locked on a familiar dark brown lion as a faraway voice yelled, “Saderia!” but before she could scream a warning, a dark dingo leapt up behind him. Saderia had just enough time to see Bone smack Dash across the face when he dared to turn around, sending the lion stumbling backward into the gaping chasm. Her body suddenly twisted and forced her to stare into nothing but endless darkness. The loud, terrified shout of her best friend filled her ears as she plunged to her doom.

A sharp gasp tore out of her throat as she forced herself to turn and face the wall of the abyss, determined not to give up. Twisting frantically in mid-fall, she reached out desperately with her paws. Her eyes widened with hope when she felt her claws snag in solid dirt. Her heart threatened to beat out of her chest as she struggled to dig her claws deeper into the wall of the chasm. Pain seared her paws when she felt them dig into coarse earth, but she fought to get a stronger hold, determined to stop her fall.

Her eyes widened with fear when the dirt grew thinner until she felt her paws slam to a stop on a sharp, jutting ledge. A cry tore out of her throat when she suddenly stopped in midair, sending a jolt of pain and shock through her body. Her back legs kicked wildly until they dug into something solid and she felt the soothing feeling of dirt between her claws. With both paws planted firmly into the wall, she looked up just as Dash managed to catch himself and swing himself closer to the wall, clinging to the side only a few feet above her.

Relief washed over her when she saw him look back at her. She could read the gratitude and hope in his amber eyes when he saw her staring back up at him. Their gaze lingered for a moment before they both turned to face the top of the abyss where they could just barely see a bit of light from the sky. They both ducked closer to the wall when three faces appeared over the edge of the abyss, one red, one dark brown, and one orange.

“Hey, there goes our food!” Rip exclaimed.

Tear shrugged. “Hey, snakes have to eat, too. As long as it’s not us, who cares?”

Bone let out a dark growl, his amber eyes gleaming in the darkness. “It doesn’t matter. Just leave these idiots to die.” He glanced at his companions before turning to sneer down into the abyss. “Have fun in the Snake Pit, tiger!”

Saderia narrowed her eyes in confusion as the dingoes broke into cold laughter and slowly turned away from the abyss. If she strained her ears, she thought she could just barely make out the sound of paw steps fading off into the distance. When she finally began to hope that the dingoes had left, she took a deep, silent breath and slowly lifted one paw off the wall. Dash looked down at her in alarm as she carefully dug her claws into a patch of dirt above her, trying not to flinch when a few small clumps of dirt rained down on her face. Daring to trust the sturdiness of the wall, she moved her back legs a bit higher and began to climb up the side.

She could read the fear in Dash's eyes as he watched her carefully begin to scale the dirt wall. Only when she finally managed to slip up beside him did he relax just a bit. Tapping him lightly with her tail, she gestured upward.

"Come on," she hissed. "Let's hurry before we lose our hold on the wall."

"Right," Dash murmured back. His amber eyes narrowed with unease as he slowly reached forward and sunk his claws into the dirt above him. She thought she heard him let out a sigh of relief when he managed to pull himself up without falling.

Forcing herself not to look down into the endless blackness below, she bravely began to climb up the wall, moving as fast as she dared. Side by side, she and Dash continued to scale the wall, their fur brushing close together for reassurance. The light of the sun beamed down on them as they drew closer to the top of the abyss. Saderia felt her heart leap with hope and excitement when she saw the edge of the chasm just a few inches above her. Boldly daring to reach out with her paws, she let out a gasp of relief when her claws dug deep into the sand above the abyss. Gripping the ground tightly with her paw, she pushed herself upward, her amber eyes glinting with determination. She smiled hopefully when she poked her head up above the abyss, only to let out a cry of shock when dark brown-black paws clamped down on her own. Her face went pale with fear when she looked up and found herself staring up into the cold, threatening face of Bone.

"What are you still doing here?" she cried.

Bone's face was dark and menacing. "I've known dingoes who could crawl out of the Snake Pit."

“Let us up!” Dash shouted as Bone slammed one paw over his, preventing him from moving or ducking away.

Bone just sneered and turned to Saderia. “Just so you know, Rip and Tear have gone back to camp, so they won’t save you and neither will Dingo. Speaking of Dingo, he may be hiding out at the moment, but I know for a fact that he’s been watching you lately and that for some reason he seems to like you. Why, I don’t know, but he does.”

Dingo? He was alive? “What does that have to do with anything?” she snapped.

He snorted. “Dingo wants to take care of you and help you. I guess he needs some reason to keep living and this time you’re his pet project, but I’ll soon take care of that. Dingo’s not allowed to be happy. And now, just like last time, Dingo won’t be around to save the one he likes so much the one time she really needs it. He’ll destroy himself because of that.” He let out a cold laugh. “Sorry, tiger, but this isn’t really about you. If you want someone to blame for your death, blame Dingo. And don’t worry. I’ll be sure to tell him about your slow and painful death down at the bottom of the Snake Pit.”

“Why are you doing this?” she shouted, shivering at his words. *Slow and painful death...* What was going to happen to them? Was he actually doing all of this just to hurt Dingo? She gritted her teeth in disgust. “Why do you hate him so much?” she demanded.

Bone just grinned. “I’ll leave you to wonder about that while you’re being eaten alive. Have fun, tiger, lion.”

Saderia’s eyes widened, but before she could protest, Bone’s claws dug deep into her skin, spilling blood over her paws as he yanked them off of the edge and threw them into the abyss. A scream split the air as Saderia fell backwards, her eyes wide with alarm. She watched in horror as Bone disappeared from sight, his cold laughter echoing in her ears. Her fur whipped around her face as she plummeted downward, her last glimpse of the light above her rapidly disappearing into the darkness. Twisting desperately, she tried to grab onto the wall, but it was too far away to even get a claw into. Her claws swiped wildly at the air above her to no avail.

Screams pierced the murky black air around her as she and Dash fell downward, twisting painfully against their will. Saderia’s fur blew roughly past her face as she fell faster and faster. Her heart stopped in her chest as

she plunged through nothing but endless miles of open air, unable to stop herself and save herself.

“Saderia!”

She looked up when Dash’s shout split the air just in time to see him dig his claws into the side. His body jerked upward as he caught himself against the wall, but before he could try to steady himself, he held out his paw to try to catch her. Saderia reached out desperately to try to grab it, but just before their paws could meet, Dash stumbled and fell against the wall, his paw falling short just mere inches of hers.

“Dash!” she screamed as she plunged downward and watched as her friend was swallowed up by the darkness above her.

She thought she heard a shout from above as she frantically twisted in midair. Her heart skipped and finally started beating again when she felt her paw brush against something solid. Reaching out desperately, she managed to dig her claws into the wall just long enough to slow her fall. Before she could even breathe a sigh of relief, a strangled shriek of pain tore out of her chest when her body slammed against a rough ledge and her paws were thrown off the wall. Stumbling backward, she let out a gasp when she tumbled onto a closer ledge then let out a scream when she began to fall.

An instant later, her body slammed against something solid and her scream was abruptly cut off. Gasping for breath, she felt her heart stop when her body exploded in pain. Her paws tangled underneath her as she rolled forward against the hard ground. Blood splattered across her face when sharp stones dug into her sides. When at last she came to a stop, the only thing she could do was lay there, panting, as blood seeped out around her.

She heard someone shout her name and looked up as a large animal thudded against the ground; soon she found herself staring up into the glowing amber eyes of Dash. Her wide eyes stared unblinkingly back into his until she finally pulled herself up and looked around. Ignoring the pain from her wounds and the sticky blood dripping from her fur, she tried to see through the darkness. Her heart started to beat again when she realized that there was nothing but blackness all around her. Huddling closer to Dash, she struggled to stay on her paws. She knew she would need her strength if she had any hope of finding a way out of the bottom of the chasm.

## The bottom of the Snake Pit.

Dingo padded cautiously back to his secret den, carrying a tiny mouthful of prey. As he walked, he thought about the tiger and the lion. He had watched them a lot and had even risked going out to spy on them after he became an outcast to make sure they were okay. He had still wanted to figure out what they were doing out in the desert and if they had found the other forest animals they were looking for, as well.

Suddenly a loud howl sounded from behind him, jolting him out of his thoughts. He frantically whirled around and gaped in shock when he saw Bone sitting behind him at the top of a large sand dune. Dingo froze in alarm, not sure whether to stay and fight or to run for his life.

Bone waved amicably at him. "Hi, Dingo! Mind if we have a little chat?"

Dingo frowned and narrowed his eyes, daring to take a few bold steps forward. "Bone, what are you doing here?" And how had he found him?

"Don't run. If you're wondering, you were easy to find, Dingo, so you might want to work on that," Bone informed him as he leapt off of the dune and began trotting toward him. "And besides, I've been watching you, so I knew exactly where you were."

Dingo froze. "You've been watching me?"

By now Bone was standing right in front of him. "Yeah, I've been watching you watch the forest food. Obviously you like them for some reason."

"Why didn't you attack me if you saw me before?" Dingo demanded.

"I will later on. I won't attack you now; I'll save that for next time."

Dingo growled in annoyance. "Then what *are* you doing here?"

"I just came to tell you something." Bone paused then sneered at him. "Guess who fell into the Snake Pit recently."

Dingo blinked and stared at him for a long time, his mind whirling with confusion and unease. "You mean who was *pushed*," he growled. "I don't want to know. Go tell Rip or somebody else about it. I don't want to hear it."

“I think you do,” Bone growled, stopping him from turning around and storming away. “Now go ahead, guess. Guess who fell in.”

“I’m not playing this game anymore, Bone. I’m an outcast; I should be free of it. Now if you don’t mind, I have to go back to being an outcast and stop chatting to the Second in Command who’s out to kill me. Goodbye.” Dingo turned around and started walking then froze at the sound of Bone’s voice.

“Fine, if you really don’t want to know. But if you’re looking for the forest food, I would suggest you ask the snakes for directions.”

The silence that spread out between them was deadly. Dingo didn’t move until, very slowly, he whispered, “What are you talking about?”

“That’s who fell into the Snake Pit: those two forest food creatures you were spying on.”

Dingo whirled around to face him with burning eyes. “You mean you pushed them!” he shouted.

Bone just shrugged. “Fell, were pushed...why bother with details?”

“Why?” Dingo demanded as his words began to sink in and a deep sense of dread and failure washed over him.

“To hurt you,” Bone replied simply as he turned and began to walk away. “I told you I would make your life miserable, Dingo, and so I have. I thought you would be interested to know that your precious forest food are being eaten alive by the snakes in the Snake Pit.”

“You sick...” Dingo broke off, knowing there was nothing he could do, knowing he had failed again and Bone had won. He hung his head, closing his eyes to fight the pain and tears until a sudden hopeful thought flickered through his mind. His eyes opened wide as his head shot up, his light brown irises bright with hope. “Bone...” he said hesitantly. “How long ago did you push them in?”

“A few minutes ago,” Bone tossed over his shoulder as he bounded over the sand dune. “They’re probably being eaten right this second.” He glanced over his shoulder once to sneer at him and then he was gone.

Dingo’s ears pricked up as he felt a sudden glimmer of hope. Maybe there was a way to save them if they could just hold on for a little longer... They had to. And he had to try. He would do anything to help them and make up for how he had failed to save Claw the last time. Dingo took a deep breath and, without giving it another thought, he raced off in the

direction of the most hated place the desert knew besides the Snake Pit itself. The second most feared area around the desert was the only place that could help him and he was desperate to find something there to save the ones he cared about. As he ran, the sun began its slow descent towards the horizon, casting orange rays out across the desert sand. Dingo looked up and gulped before pushing himself to run faster. He had to save the forest animals before it was too late.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Danger

Silence filled the air. Saderia's eyes flicked rapidly back and forth throughout the blackness of the chasm, but no matter how hard she squinted into the darkness, she was unable to see a thing. Her bloodied paws soundlessly scooped up a clump of the dirt beneath her and brought it closer to her face, but her eyes were unable to see the orange of her paw nor the gritty texture of the dirt. Tiny clumps of the damp earth slipped through her claws until she shook it off and placed her sore paw back on the ground. Trying not to wince when she felt her feet sink into the mud lining the bottom of the abyss, she again struggled to see.

"Dash," she whispered. She stepped closer to him and felt a tingle of relief when his ragged fur brushed against hers.

"Yes?" he hissed back.

Her fur shivered and bristled in the eerie coldness of the chasm. "Do...do you know where the wall is?"

His head swung around to look at her; the only thing she could see were his amber eyes glowing with fear and unease. "No. I can't see it."

Saderia took a deep breath and wrapped her tail around his. "Come on," she murmured. "We can't stay here forever. Let's find it."

"Okay," he whispered back.

They hesitated for a long moment before cautiously extending a paw forward. Her tail squeezed Dash's as a wave of pain surged through her injured body and she squinted into the abyss, trying desperately to see through the blackness. A soft whimper escaped her throat when her paw brushed against a sharp, pointed stone and slipped, causing her to stumble. She tried to ignore it and keep moving. After several minutes of feeling around along the bottom of the abyss, she began to wonder if she would ever find the wall or if she was somehow getting farther away from it.

Her heart skipped a beat as she peered around the abyss and heard Bone's words echo in her mind. *Slow and painful death...* What was this



place and why did Bone and the other dingoes seem to fear it so much? Swallowing nervously, she turned to look up at the sky and felt her heart stop when she realized she couldn't see the top. Not even a sliver of light was able to penetrate the endless blackness of the chasm. Trying to calm herself down, she slowly looked down and began to feel her way around the chasm once more.

She froze when her paw brushed something smooth and cold along the muddy ground. Pausing, she turned to stare intently at the ground, struggling to see what she had stepped on. After what felt like ages, her eyes finally began to adjust to the darkness and when she squinted, she was able to make out a long, dirty white stone. She looked closer and let out a sharp gasp when she realized what it was.

A bone.

"Dash," she hissed frantically, stumbling closer to him and feeling her fur bristle in alarm.

Dash whirled around to face her. His amber eyes widened when he peered through the darkness and saw what she had. Instinctively, his paw brushed against hers. "Just...just ignore it," he whispered. "Let's just get out of here."

Nodding meekly, Saderia forced herself to turn away from it. Her eyes gleamed in the darkness and she felt a tingle of relief when she realized she could make out slight differences in the world around her. Her paws moved faster against the mud when she thought she saw a slight ledge jutting out somewhere above her. After just a few minutes, her paws brushed up against the hard, dirt-covered wall.

Glancing up at the tall, black wall, she slowly took a deep breath and leapt onto her back paws. Digging her claws deep into a sturdy patch of dirt, she carefully pulled herself onto the wall, squeezing Dash's tail tightly when her paws left the ground. Reaching forward, she grabbed another clump of dirt and pulled herself up, swaying a bit before steadying herself. Dash's fur brushed hers as her back paws pushed themselves deep into the muddy wall to steady her. Cool bits of dirt sprinkled through her toes and damp mud squished up against her dirty fur. Gritting her teeth, Saderia ignored the painful ache of her wounds and continued to push herself upward.

After several minutes, they had managed to reach a short ledge a few feet above the bottom of the chasm. Heaving a sigh, Saderia clamped her paws around the solid ledge and looked up, feeling a shiver of dismay when her gaze met a wall of towering blackness. No matter how hard she squinted, she still couldn't see the light of day above her. Trying hard not to look down, she narrowed her eyes and began climbing once more, determined to keep going until she reached the top.

Her claws dug deep into the dirt above as she hauled herself up, ignoring the sting of pain in her legs. Her back legs pushed roughly into the dirt below. Saderia gritted her teeth in determination and kept her gaze trained on the wall above her, refusing to be daunted or distracted from her goal. It was only when a soft, almost inaudible hiss whispered from the depths below that she dared to pause and prick her ears.

A cold shiver raced up her spine when something smooth brushed against her back leg. Frowning, she glanced back to see what it was, regretting it almost instantly. Looking down into the endless blackness below her, her body swayed on the side of the wall and an overwhelming sense of fear and vertigo washed over her. Forcing herself to turn around and concentrate on the wall, she felt her heart begin to pound when she felt the same smooth, long creature slide up her leg.

Tearing her leg away from the wall, she kicked out as violently as she dared, feeling a tingle of fear when she heard a soft hissing noise. Her eyes narrowed in alarm as she reached out and grabbed a spot on the wall above her. Her body swayed dangerously over open air when she pushed her back legs against the wall and began to climb. Struggling to climb faster, she ignored the thought of falling when something tangled around her back paw. She paused to kick it away and continued to climb, suppressing a tiny whimper of fear. Glancing to the side, she found herself staring into Dash's wide, terrified amber eyes.

She trembled in alarm when she felt two strange, smooth creatures slither up along her back, clinging to her fur despite her violent kicking and thrashing. A soft, collective hissing erupted from below her, growing louder and louder every second. Saderia opened her mouth to let out a scream, but before she could make a sound, one of the eerie creatures slid forward and wrapped itself roughly around her mouth.

Recoiling in alarm, Saderia felt her body swing over nothing but darkness when her paws nearly slipped off of the wall. Digging her claws deep into the dirt, she struggled to shake off the thing coiled around her muzzle. Her heart beat faster when the cold, vindictive hissing grew louder, seeming to echo from every direction. She let out a muted hiss and tried to bite down on the thing wrapped around her mouth, but found her fangs wet with only her own blood when the creature carefully avoided her teeth.

A cold sweat broke out on her forehead when two slippery creatures crept up her paws and coiled themselves around her back legs. Without warning, they tore her back paws away from the wall and tied themselves around both of her legs to bind them together. Letting out a muted cry of alarm, she felt her body lurch downward. Her claws dug roughly into the earth above her as she struggled to keep herself from falling. Her heart hammered in her chest when she felt muted shouts of alarm sound from beside her. Was Dash being attacked too?

Shivers of fear and disgust racked her body when she felt dozens of strange, slippery creatures slither up and down her back, wrapping themselves around her belly and tangling themselves in her wild, dirty fur. The awful hissing sound filled her ears, drowning out the cries and struggling of her best friend and the pounding of her own heart. The loud, terrifying sound seemed to reverberate throughout the entire chasm, growing louder and louder until her ears started to ache. Rough, scaly bodies slipped across her forehead and coiled themselves around her legs, seeming unbothered by her frantic flailing. Her heart skipped a beat when she felt several of the creatures slip toward her front paws and dig themselves into the dirt. With a muted shriek of horror, she realized her claws were slipping and the creatures were pushing her paws out of the wall.

The hissing thundered through the abyss, drowning out her every cry and movement. Sweat dripped down her face and her heart beat so fast her chest felt almost numb. Her eyes stretched wide with terror when she felt the creatures wrap themselves around her front paws and slowly shove her off the wall. A silent scream scraped her throat raw as she began to fall backwards. Her eyes opened wide when her paws left the dirt and her ears were suddenly filled with a soft, malevolent chant echoing among the booming hisses from below.

“Welcome to the S-s-snake Pit, s-s-strangers-s-s, deadliest-s-st place in the des-s-ert!”

Squinting against the dying rays of the sun, Dingo raced back through the desert with a vine clamped tightly in his mouth. Looking around frantically, he suddenly skidded to a halt when a dark figure leapt to the top of the sand dune in front of him. His eyes widened in shock before he lashed his tail and let out a low, furious snarl. “Not you again!” he exclaimed, thoroughly fed up with running into his worst enemy. What bad news did he have for him this time?

Bone glanced at the vine he was carrying and raised an eyebrow. “Trying to save the forest food, Dingo?”

“What’s it to you?”

Bone ignored that and snapped, “You know, considering I’m Second in Command in the pack and you’re an outcast, you should be more afraid of me.”

“I’d be afraid of a mouse before I was afraid of you! Now get out of my way! I’m sick of running into you.” Dingo bared his fangs in a challenge as best he could through the vine.

Bone narrowed his eyes at him and smirked. “Really? Well, I’ve got news for you, Dingo.” He raised his tail as a signal and suddenly Rock, Rip, Tear, and two other dingoes leapt to the top of the dune behind Bone, baring their fangs and glaring down at him. Dingo gaped at them as Bone sneered back. “This time I brought friends.”

Dingo’s eyes widened in dismay; the six of them were blocking the way to the Snake Pit and there was no way he could fight off all of them. His head whipped around to stare at Bone, his mouth opening in a silent plea.

Bone just laughed. He glanced back at the five dingoes he had summoned then turned back to Dingo. His lips turned up in a bloodthirsty smirk. “Kill him!”

With vicious snarls, the dingoes streamed down the sand dune and Dingo had no choice but to run, dragging the extremely long vine behind him. His mind whirled with distress as he raced through the desert, feeling the hot breath of his pursuers on his tail. How would he get back to the Snake Pit to help the tiger and lion? He swallowed hard, trying not to think

about them for fear that he was already too late to save them. He shivered. The forest animals could manage to hold off the snakes just long enough for him to get there, couldn't they?

He tried to disappear behind a dune, but the dingoes jumped in front of him and forced him the other way. No matter how hard he tried to outrun them or swerve the other way, there were just too many of them that he couldn't dodge. Ditching the vine, he ran as fast as he could, desperate to outrun them and make it back to the Snake Pit before time ran out. The dingoes were fast on his trail, hurling insults at him and snapping at his tail as they howled for a fight. As Dingo winced and struggled to outrun them, his only hope was for the forest animals to survive until he returned.

Saderia's eyes blinked open. Her head ached with pain and confusion, but when she glanced around at her dark surroundings, a sharp gasp tore out of her throat. Her head jerked upward in alarm as images raced through her mind: of falling off the side of the wall, of smooth creatures winding around her body, of that...hissing. Of hitting the ground with a rough, painful smack; of the gleam of sharp fangs in the dim light and the sticky feeling of blood seeping through her fur; of seeing a dark rock loom above her head and feeling a sharp strike to her forehead. After that, everything was black.

Shaking her head and blinking rapidly, Saderia tried to stand then froze, feeling a pang of alarm when she realized her paws were bound together. Her heart beat faster as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness then calmed down when she realized it wasn't a creature holding her paws together. A frown spread across her face when she just barely managed to make out a dim splash of green and realized her paws had been bound together with some sort of vine. Where had the vines come from?

She turned to look around, only to recoil when her body seared with pain. Wincing and turning away, she let out a long, shaky breath when she felt a burning pain along her legs, belly, and back. Her fur felt sticky with blood and she could feel a sharp stinging and throbbing in her forehead. For a moment, her gaze blurred and the world swam before her eyes before she managed to blink away her dizziness. Feeling her throat go dry with fear and pain, she tried to swallow and shivered when she felt a glob of blood

slide down her throat. Shivering at the disgusting, salty taste, she turned to look around, feeling her dirty fur brush up against sticky hair.

Blinking in surprise, she whirled around and found herself staring into two round amber eyes.

“Dash!” she exclaimed.

“Saderia!” he hissed back.

Her heart leapt with hope when she heard his voice, but when she struggled to turn to face him, she realized that the strong vines that had bound her paws together had also bound her to Dash. Tied together back to back, the only thing they could do was turn their head to look at each other. Her heart beat wildly.

“Dash, are you okay?” she hissed.

“I...I think so,” he whispered back. “I’m alive, at least. Are *you* okay?”

“I guess,” she murmured. “Are...are your paws tied, too?”

Dash’s amber eyes bobbed up and down in the darkness. “Yes,” he whimpered. “Saderia, I can’t move and there’s nothing but darkness all around us. What’s going on? How are we going to get out of here?”

“I...I don’t know,” she stammered. She paused and thrashed roughly against the vines, struggling to break free of their tight hold to no avail. A soft sigh escaped her throat. “Any ideas?”

Dash shook his head. “No. Even if we break out of these vines, how are we going to get out of this pit? What if those...things grab us again?”

Saderia shivered and looked away, muttering, “What *were* those things anyway?”

“S-s-snakes-s-s, tiger.”

Saderia’s ears pricked up and she whirled around at the sound of the soft, whispering voice, her heart beginning to pound. Her eyes stretched wide in astonishment when her gaze pierced through the darkness and she was able to make out the long, scaly body of a viper. Her heart skipped a beat. Had that snake just spoken to her?

A shiver of fear raced up her spine as the snake slowly slithered toward them, flicking its forked tongue out at them and inspecting them with wide, unblinking eyes. “S-s-so...” it hissed. “How are the fores-s-st food faring?”

“W-what?” Saderia gasped, her mind whirling with alarm.

“How are you, pris-s-soners-s-s?” the snake rephrased.

“Prisoners?” Dash gasped.

The snake ignored him and continued to slide toward them. Shivers of fear raced up Saderia’s spine when it leaned toward them and opened its mouth to expose razor-sharp fangs. Her whole body seemed to shiver and tense when it pressed its fangs against the vines wrapped around her paws, seeming to tug on them before pulling away. “Hmm, not too tight, not too loos-s-se,” it whispered. “Tell me, fores-s-st food...”

“Why does everything out here have to call us food?” Dash whimpered.

The snake let out a soft chuckle. “That’s-s-s what you are in the des-s-ert,” it hissed. “I take it you fores-s-st food have met the dingoes-s-s.”

“You...you know about the dingoes?” Saderia stammered.

“Of cours-s-se,” it hissed, a grin spreading across its face. “We feas-s-st on them a lot rec-c-cently.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in horror. “You *eat* dingoes?”

The snake didn’t appear to be listening to her. “Tell me, tiger,” it hissed, making her wince and recoil in fear when its forked tongue touched her fur. “Tell me, what are fores-s-st food doing in the des-s-ert? In the S-s-snake Pit?”

Saderia shivered at the name of the abyss, remembering Bone’s creepy words. Ignoring the snake’s question, she demanded, “What is this place and what are you going to do to us?”

“I shall let King Cobra explain to you. I am only here to s-s-see if you need s-s-something. Are you hungry, tiger? *S-s-starving?*”

“*Hungry?*” Saderia exclaimed. Her eyes widened in disbelief.

The snake seemed to ignore her as it turned away from them and began slithering toward a tiny archway in the dirt walls surrounding them. “No matter,” it called. “I shall as-s-sume you are famished. I will fetch you s-s-some fruit.”

“Fruit?” Saderia gasped.

The snake merely flicked its tail, calling, “Are the pris-s-soners-s-s fond of fruit?” before it disappeared behind a wall of blackness.

Saderia let out a long, slow sigh as her head drooped in exhaustion. She felt Dash’s eyes boring into her back as she struggled to work through

the confusion and fear clouding her mind. Had she really just talked to a snake? And did they really eat dingoes?

She looked up to ask Dash if everything she had seen was really real, but before she could speak a word, she was interrupted by a loud hissing sound. Looking up sharply, she turned to face the tiny archway carved into the side of the dirty wall and watched as a large snake slithered into their room. Every hair on her back raised in fear when she saw the snake's bloody, razor-sharp fangs and read the excitement in its odd, gleaming eyes. Her heart began to beat faster when she saw it drag its long body toward them and stop just a few inches away from her. The snake smiled and hissed softly, flicking out its tongue and brushing it against the blood on Saderia's battered face.

Trying not to wince at the feel of its eerie forked tongue or the heavy scent of blood on its breath, she faced the snake. "Who are you?" she demanded, struggling to hide her fear.

The snake smiled. "I am King Cobra. I lead the s-s-snakes-s-s of the S-s-snake Pit. Although you, as-s-s fores-s-st food know nothing of the s-s-stories of the S-s-snake Pit. Correct?"

"St-stories?" Saderia stammered. "What stories?"

"Fores-s-st food are les-s-s-s informed, I s-s-see. At leas-s-st the dingoes-s-s know to fear us-s-s..." The snake cocked its head and grinned widely. "Well, tiger, s-s-snakes-s-s have lived in the S-s-snake Pit for c-c-centuries and all the dingoes-s-s know about us-s-s and fear us-s-s. We're deadly killers-s-s. S-s-see, every onc-c-ce in a while, a dingo falls-s-s or gets-s-s pushed into the S-s-snake Pit and we eat them. Though we're grateful for the meal, we are sure to let the dingoes-s-s know not to mes-s-s-s with us-s-s. Therefore we kill them as-s-s painfully as-s-s poss-s-s-sible to s-s-scare them. We have two methods-s-s. We either bite our victim and let the pois-s-son kill them s-s-slowly or we eat our victim alive."

Saderia's eyes stretched wide with horror. "That's what you're going to do to *us*?"

"S-s-so s-s-sorry, tiger. It's-s-s nothing pers-s-sonal."

Saderia gaped at him in shock, but before she could try to say something in her defense, she was startled by a sudden hiss from behind the archway. She looked up wildly just in time to see the viper slip back into the room, coiling its tail tightly around several pieces of fruit.



“I brought the fruit for the fore-s-st food, King Cobra,” it hissed.

“Good,” the king cobra replied, flicking its tongue at the viper as it moved aside to let it pass.

“The fruit is-s-s not pois-s-soned or tampered with,” the viper assured them with a creepy smile as it dropped the fruit at their paws. It nodded once to the king cobra before turning and slipping out of the tiny, dirt ‘room’, its tail trailing lightly through the mud.

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock as she gaped at the fruit. “Why are you feeding us if you’re just going to kill us?” she exclaimed.

“We s-s-snakes-s-s take pride in making our prey comfortable before their s-s-suffering,” the king cobra announced with a smile. “Pleas-s-se enjoy our fruit.”

“If you have fruit, why don’t you eat it instead of us?” Dash demanded, his voice shaking with fear.

The snake just shrugged. “We s-s-snakes-s-s don’t much care for the tas-s-ste of fruit. We wouldn’t pass-s-s-s up a dec-c-cent meal.”

Saderia hissed and narrowed her eyes. “Where are you getting this fruit anyway? We’re in a desert!”

“We have tunnels-s-s leading to a nearby fores-s-st,” the king cobra explained. “We s-s-simply go up to the s-s-surface, grab s-s-some of the fruit and vines-s-s and be on our way. We don’t s-s-stay up there long because-s-se we are much more protected and dangerous-s-s in our wonderful chas-s-sm.” Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise as the snake leaned forward and peered at the vines around them. “Are the vines-s-s too tight?” it asked.

“What’s it matter?” Saderia spat, shaking off her confusion.

The king cobra tugged on the vines to loosen them just a bit. “There,” it hissed, flicking its tongue in satisfaction. “For your happines-s-s until the feas-s-st. I would tell you how we plan to kill you, but I fear it would s-s-scare you. I mus-s-st leave now. Pleas-s-se call us-s-s if you would like more fruit.”

“Wait!” Saderia shouted as the snake turned to leave, her brave façade crumbling. “You...you can’t do this! I...I’m Princess Saderia of the forest! I rule the forest and so does Dash!”

The king cobra blinked in surprise and then smiled a wide, bloody smile. “I was-s-s unaware I was-s-s in the pres-s-senc-c-ce of royalty s-s-

such as-s-s mys-s-self. Yes-s-s, of cours-s-se, your Majes-s-s-ty. We s-s-sinc-c-erely apologize for any mis-s-scomfot, and we promis-s-se to give you a death s-s-stone appropriate for a Princess-s-s.”

Dash let out a terrified whimper and huddled closer to Saderia, unable to control his fearful shaking.

The snake frowned. “Oh, I’m afraid I’ve s-s-scared your friend,” it hissed. “I’m s-s-sorry.” It flicked its tongue out at them before grinning once more. “Pleas-s-se, relax and eat.” It smiled then turned around and began to slither out of the room, its long tail looping in the room and trailing soundlessly behind it. “I mus-s-st go,” it called over its shoulder, “but I will be back s-s-soon. In the meantime, enjoy the fruit and if you’re having any thoughts-s-s on es-s-scaping, you mus-s-st know that there are at leas-s-st a thous-s-sand of us-s-s.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in horror, but before she could protest or say a word, the snake soundlessly disappeared behind a wall of blackness, its eerie hiss slowly dying away. Turning, she felt a flash of alarm when she read the terror in Dash’s eyes.

“Saderia,” he whispered, “those snakes are psychos! They’re going to *eat us!*”

“Just calm down,” she hissed, trying to make herself listen to her own advice. Her eyes darted wildly around through the blackness and her ears strained to pick up the sound of hissing. Narrowing her eyes, she turned around to face Dash, her tail lashing with determination. “All right, I’ve got a plan. We’re going to eat the fruit so that we can keep our strength up and make it look like the snakes are winning and scaring us into doing what they want.”

“They are!” he whispered back. “That cobra thing just said there are *thousands* of them out there...!”

“I know, but it doesn’t matter,” Saderia hissed back. “Would you rather sit here and wait for them to eat us or try to save ourselves?”

Dash squeezed his mouth shut and sheepishly avoided her gaze. “Fine,” he muttered. “What do you think we should do?”

“After we eat this fruit, we’re going to start to try to cut these vines. I don’t know how long the snakes are going to keep feeding us like this, but I think we can assume they’ll let us live for at least a few hours. Considering how skinny we are after this entire journey, I...I think they

want to fatten us up first.” Ignoring the shiver that ran down her spine and the soft whimper from Dash, she continued, “When we cut the vines, we’re going to hide the cut up parts behind us so that the snakes don’t see it if they come in to check on us. We’re going to leave the vines intact so that we’ll still look tied up, but cut them and loosen them up enough that we’ll be able to tear ourselves free and run for it when the time comes.”

Dash nodded meekly in the darkness of the pit. “O-okay, Saderia.”

“All right,” she whispered, using every bit of strength to keep her voice even and unafraid. “Let’s get started then.”

When Dash nodded, she slowly turned and pressed her claws up against the vines, gritting her teeth in determination as she began to tear it apart. A frown creased her face when she realized just how thick the vine was. She had never seen or felt any vines so strong and unbreakable. Remembering what the snake had said about the forest, she felt a tingle of shock when she realized that this vine could not have come from her forest. Did that mean there was another forest where the snakes had gotten their vines? One that was...nearby? Her heart beat faster as she dug her claws into the green vine, sawing roughly at the firm green stems. If there really was a new forest out there, she hoped desperately that her kingdom would soon find it. After all, they deserved a better, safer life even if she and Dash never got to see the light of day again.

Stars shone in the night sky, twinkling as if taunting the scared, desperate dingo in the desert below. Wild, bloodshot brown eyes flicked fearfully back and forth as the canine raced frantically through the desert, panting heavily and blinking rapidly to keep fearful tears from pricking his eyes. Dingo still hadn’t found a way to get to the Snake Pit without being killed by Bone and his stupid pack. Bone had actually gone to the trouble of stationing a group of dingoes along the edge of the Snake Pit with orders to attack him if they saw him *just* to keep him from saving the forest animals after *hours* had passed since Bone had pushed them in.

He wondered if he was far too late, if they had already been killed... But one of the rumors of the Snake Pit was that the snakes fattened up their prey before they killed it. If that was their plan then he still had time, but he had to get to the chasm now before the snakes got impatient.

Carrying a vine he had taken once again from an eerie forest, the second most hated place the dingoes knew, he found himself slinking around the perimeter of the Snake Pit, trying madly to find a way past the dingoes that were waiting for him. He was determined to get past the pack members no matter what it took.

At last, he found a spot that had temporarily been left unguarded. With a surge of hope, he didn't even hesitate to run forward. He was desperate to know if the tiger and lion were still alive, desperate to know that he hadn't been too late. The dingoes could catch him and kill him later if they wanted or even throw him into the Snake Pit right then and there, but he *had* to get the forest animals out of that awful abyss.

Running at top speed, Dingo felt his heart skip when he realized he could see the gaping blackness of the Snake Pit up ahead. He hoped with all his heart that the forest animals were still alive and that he still had a chance to save them.

Saderia's head drooped with exhaustion. Her tail flicked listlessly back and forth as she forced her eyes to stay open and her claws ached with tiredness. A flash of hopelessness lit up her tired amber eyes as she continued to saw at the rough vines. She had no idea what time it was and she had no hope of finding out. The only indication she had that it was nighttime was her own natural tiredness. It was a mystery how many hours she had spent hunched over the vine, sawing away at the green stems and ignoring the aching pain from her wounds.

Her belly felt sore and swollen after all the fruit the snakes had given her. At first, the thought of having food and being able to build her strength had seemed appealing, but after more than a week of living off of nothing but tiny rations and cactus juice, her stomach had become unable to handle such large amounts of nutrition. Thinking of the fruit, an image of the snakes she had seen burned in her mind. Pushing it away, she tried to focus on cutting the vine, not wanting to think about the snakes and what they might have planned. The only way she had managed to stay so focused and calm was because she had refused to think about the snakes. For the same reason, she and Dash hadn't said a word to each other. The only indication Dash hadn't fallen asleep or given up was the determined brush of his shoulders against hers as he worked to cut the vine.

A sharp hissing sound tore her out of her thoughts. Her head jolted upward as she stared at the archway. Moving rapidly, she grabbed the cut vine tendrils and stuffed them behind her. She could hear Dash's panicked breathing as he worked fast to hide the sliced vines. Wrapping her tail tightly around the jagged edges of the severed stems, she whirled around just in time to see a disgruntled cobra slither through the archway. Much to her surprise, it seemed to be hissing under its breath.

Looking up at it almost expectedly, she watched as it glanced up at them, flicking its tongue out irritably. "S-s-so..." it hissed. "I take it you fores-s-st food are well-fed now?"

"Um...I guess," Saderia stammered, not quite sure how to answer.

"Good. I'm s-s-sorry for this-s-s—we didn't expect the others-s-s to get s-s-so impatient—but they s-s-say they don't feel like waiting anymore. King Cobra and I tried to argue, but the others-s-s kept s-s-saying they're s-s-s-starving and s-s-sick of waiting, s-s-so we finally had to give up and s-s-say 'Fine, we'll jus-s-st eat them now.' S-s-so s-s-sorry. Before, we would have given you more time to live, but now we mus-s-st kill you because-s-s of their impatienc-c-ce and unwillingness-s-s to follow our normal ritual."

Saderia's eyes stretched wide with horror and Dash froze beside her. "We're going to be killed right now?" she gasped.

"The s-s-snakes are preparing the ritual as-s-s we s-s-speak," the cobra hissed calmly. "We will come for you in minutes-s-s. Until then, enjoy the rest of your time." Without another word, it turned and began to slide out of the archway, leaving Saderia and Dash alone.

Saderia felt her heart skip a beat. "Hurry!" she exclaimed as she grabbed the vines. "Cut the rest of the vines!"

Dash whirled around, his amber eyes wide with fear as he began to claw at the rest of the green stems, his fur bristling against hers. Saderia glanced wildly at the archway as she tore at the vines, her claws scraping against her own paw in her haste.

"Come on," she whispered as she cut away the last of the vines and threw them aside. Leaping to her feet, she was overcome by a sharp, painful ache when her legs stretched after being in the same cramped position for so long. Ignoring the sting of pain, she darted silently toward the archway, beckoning with her tail for Dash to follow her. Stopping him with her tail,

she put a paw to her lips before cautiously ducking around the side of the arch to peer out into the rest of the Snake Pit and see what she was up against.

Her heart stopped when she looked out and found herself staring at a pit filled with hundreds and hundreds of snakes. A gasp almost escaped her throat when she realized she could no longer see the muddy, black color of the bottom of the pit; the entire chasm was filled with nothing but the smooth, writhing bodies of snakes. Disgust rose in her throat when she watched the snakes slide carelessly over each other, their long, scaly bodies slipping easily over piles of snakes and dirty white bones.

A loud scraping sound groaned above the hisses, startling her and forcing her to look up. Her eyes widened in alarm when she saw several snakes slither from an archway just a few feet away from her. The other snakes hissed in excitement and turned to face them, turning their scaly backs to Saderia and Dash. The snakes slipping out from within the archway slowly began to push a large, smooth stone across the floor of the chasm. The snakes parted and let them slide the stone to the center of the abyss. Saderia's heart skipped a beat when she stared at the stone and realized that it was coated in a dull, messy layer of blood. Was that the 'death stone' the snakes had talked about earlier?

Without warning, the snakes started to part when the stone was stopped in the center of the abyss. Their excited hisses echoed around the pit as other snakes slipped forward and began to decorate the stone with fruits. Feeling sick, Saderia could only watch as the king cobra slithered lazily over the top of the stone and stood above the others with a wide grin. He let out a sharp hiss that seemed to echo through the pit as the other snakes voiced their anticipation.

"Saderia..." Dash whispered.

"Shh," she snapped, trying to control the frantic beating of her heart. A deep shiver raced down her spine when she gazed out at the wall of the pit and realized it was completely surrounded by hundreds of squirming snakes. Climbing the wall was her only hope of getting out, but how would they even make it a foot up the wall before the snakes got them? Looking around frantically, she searched for some other way out, but found herself surrounded on all sides by nothing but snakes. The wall wasn't just her only hope, but her only option.

She turned to face Dash, her amber eyes glittering with fear. “We... we have to climb the wall,” she whispered.

“But...”

“It’s our only hope. When we run out there, don’t even think about the snakes or stop to look at them. Just keep running and leap onto the wall. Don’t think about balancing or falling and just *go*. Even if we fall, at least we won’t be eaten alive.”

Dash’s eyes met hers in the darkness, their amber depths gleaming with fear. His tail wrapped tightly around hers. “Okay,” he whispered. “... Whenever you’re ready...”

Saderia took a deep breath and faced the snakes, her heart thumping wildly in her chest. “Now!” she hissed.

Forcing herself not to hesitate, she launched herself into the sea of snakes, ignoring the sound of hissing when her paws slammed against their slender bodies. Her tail squeezed roughly against Dash’s and her paws slammed viciously against the snake-covered ground, desperate to get to the wall. An outraged hissing broke out around her as she launched herself forward, her amber eyes widening with fear and hope. She could feel the enraged glares of the snakes on her back as her claws dug deep into the wall above her and her feet crashed into the solid dirt. Never stopping to notice the snakes or even worry about steadying herself, she reached up with her paws and pulled herself up the wall as quickly as she could.

Her body swung dangerously back and forth over the abyss as her paws tore into the dirt. She heard determined growls from beside her, but didn’t stop to look at Dash to make sure he was okay. The rough feel of his tail wrapped tightly around hers told her everything she needed to know.

Thick clumps of dirt rained down on her face as she reached upward, pulling herself up no matter how loose her grip was. Her eyes focused on the blackness above them and her heart beat wildly with fear and desperation. Every hair on her back bristled in alarm when she heard the loud, terrifying sound of furious hisses grow louder and louder.

An earsplitting cry of pain tore out of her throat when she felt sharp fangs tear into her back leg. Kicking with all of her might, she felt a tiny prickle of relief when the teeth left her leg and the snake fell back into the abyss. Forcing herself not to look back, she dug her claws into the wall and

continued to pull herself up, silently cursing herself when she was unable to move faster.

Livid hisses filled the air around her, thundering against her ears and echoing around the chasm. A terrified scream tore out of her throat when she felt two scaly bodies slide over her back and sink their fangs deep into her chest. Thrashing in a desperate attempt to get them off, she forced herself to keep moving even as pain coursed through her body. Her heart skipped a beat when she felt the sickening sensation of smooth, scaly bodies slithering over her own.

Snakes coiled tightly around her back legs, sending her heart pounding frantically with fear when she felt them tear her back paws out of the dirt. Kicking wildly and clawing at anything she could get, she let out a soft cry of hope when she managed to throw one away from her and stop them from binding her paws together. Throwing her legs painfully against the wall, she felt a tingle of hope when the snakes slid off of her leg with hisses of pain and anger. Digging her paws back into the dirt, she continued to climb, ignoring the blood dripping out of a wound on one of her legs.

Gritting her teeth, she struggled to shake off the snakes, but no matter how many she managed to throw off of her, they kept returning. Her eyes widened in fear when she felt uncountable numbers of snakes slipping up and down her back, wrapping themselves tightly around her body. Her heart skipped in her chest when she struggled to take a breath and felt her lungs burn with pain. Beside her, she could feel Dash struggling in alarm and silently willed him not to fall. Her own body teetered precariously on the side of the wall when a snake dug its fangs into her back, sending waves of pain down her spine.

Malevolent pairs of eyes flashed in the darkness, glaring into her own as the snakes slithered up the wall beside her. Her eyes widened in terror when she saw a thick myriad of snakes attack her front paws, curling viciously around them to try to throw them off the wall.

“No!” she shrieked, pausing desperately to try to throw them off. Yanking her paw out of the dirt and staring at the snakes writhing around it, she slammed it desperately into the dirt, feeling her body slip dangerously on the wall. Fighting to dig her claws into the dirt, she let out a raw scream when she felt a sharp sting on her paw. Shaking her paws, she tried to keep climbing, tearing into the dirt with her claws and stabbing at any snake that



drew too close. Her eyes flicked fearfully back and forth, locking on Dash for one brief moment.

The delighted hissing of the snakes drowned out her scream of terror when the snakes wrapped themselves violently around Dash's front paws and tore him off the wall. Frozen in place, she could only watch as Dash fell backward, his eyes wide and his mouth open in a silent, inaudible shout. Before she could let out a scream, she felt the snakes wrap themselves around her paws...and throw her off the wall right after him.

A shriek of fear tore out of her throat as she plummeted downward, her ears blasted with the sound of excited hisses. Before she could reach out to grab anything or save herself, she felt the snakes wrap around her paws and coil them together. Their eyes gleamed in the darkness and slow smiles spread across their faces. They stared deep into Saderia's eyes an instant before she hit the ground.

Hisses boomed around her as her back smacked against the dirt, forcing a loud scream to rip out of her chest. An intense wave of agony spread to every inch of her body. Her paws moved frantically against the tight binds of the snakes, but before she could try to save herself, she felt herself being rolled onto her back by hundreds of snakes. Crashing painfully against the ground, she was surrounded by the sound of vicious hissing. Squeezing her ears closer to her head, she tried to block it out as her eyes searched frantically for an escape. The hissing only grew louder. Shivers of disgust raced down her spine when she felt dozens of snakes slither over her belly.

Before she could try to fight, she felt herself turned painfully onto her side. The snakes wrapped around her paws briskly retreated, only to be replaced by thick vines. Without warning, the snakes tied the vines tightly around her paws and swarmed underneath her, acting as one and using their combined strength to lift her up and carry her toward the blood-covered stone. Her body twisted on top of the snakes and her heart stopped when she found herself staring into the eyes of the king cobra. A second later, the snakes threw her roughly onto the smooth, blood-spattered stone. She felt the brush of bloody fur against her own when they shoved Dash beside her, his paws bound with the same thick vines restraining hers.

The king cobra leaned over them with a malicious grin.

“Did the pris-s-soners-s-s really think they could get away?” it hissed. “Only one dingo has-s-s ever es-s-scaped the S-s-snake Pit and that was-s-s a long time ago.”

Saderia and Dash let out cries of fear as the snakes inched toward them, hissing with delight and excitement. Struggling desperately against the vines wrapped around her paws, Saderia frantically fought to escape. Beside her, she could hear Dash’s terrified growls as he tried to break through the thick stems. Looking around frantically, Saderia let out a scream of horror when a snake reared back, exposing its long, bloody fangs.

Tearing one paw out of the vines coiled around her legs, she lashed out with her claws, managing to strike one of the snakes. Even as it fell back with a furious hiss, the others quickly surged forward to take its place. Terror spiked through her body as she struggled to face the horde of snakes, her paws shaking with fear. She heard a sharp growl from beside her and whirled around just in time to see Dash yank a paw free and rake his claws across one of the snakes’ faces. Struggling to stand on her front paws, Saderia lashed out viciously, kicking her back legs in a desperate attempt to get free. A snake lunged forward and sunk its fangs into her legs, sending waves of pain through her body. Throwing it away, she raked her claws across the scaly body of another and narrowed her eyes when it fell back with the same eerie hiss.

Finally managing to kick away the vine binding her back legs, she leapt to her paws and struggled to fight off the snakes. Her best friend rapidly kicked off the last bits of the vine and jumped to his feet while she looked around wildly for some sort of escape. Her heart skipped with dismay when the snakes completely surrounded her. No matter which way she turned, there was nothing but more snakes blocking her exit. Hissing fearfully, she struggled to fight them off, but the more snakes she clawed, the more slithered forward to take their places.

“Help!” she screamed.

She whirled around to fight off a swarm of snakes, but froze when she found herself staring at a long, thick vine hanging down right in front of her. Blinking rapidly, she looked up and let out a gasp when she saw the vine swaying in the murky depths above her. In the same instant, her heart stopped when she heard a loud, familiar voice shout from far, far above them.

“Grab on!” it called. “Hurry!”

Saderia looked around wildly before lunging forward and grabbing Dash’s shoulder. “Look!” she hissed when he whirled around, gesturing wildly toward the vine. His amber eyes widened in shock as she pulled him toward it. “Grab it,” she shouted as she leapt toward the vine, digging her claws deep into the thick green stem. “It’s our only hope!”

Dash blinked and then lunged toward the vine, wrapping his paws around it as tightly as he could.

“We’ve got it! Pull us up!” Saderia shouted to the blackness above her, hoping desperately that her rescuer could hear her above the hisses of the snakes.

Almost instantly, the vine jerked upward, lifting their paws off the ground. A soft gasp escaped Saderia’s throat and her breath left her chest. She let out a whimper of fear and rapidly pulled her back paws closer to her stomach when one of the snakes lunged toward her. Shivering, she looked upward, her injured body shaking with fear and desperation. A flash of hope lit up her eyes when the vine slowly began to move upward, pulling her and Dash along with it.

Her heart beat frantically in her chest as she was hoisted out of the reach of the stunned snakes. Their furious hisses filled the entire abyss, almost shaking the walls with the sound of their rage and surprise. Closing her eyes, she huddled as close to the vine as she possibly could, her paws quivering uncontrollably. When she dared to open her eyes again, she found herself surrounded by nothing but blackness. Daring to look down, she felt a shiver of fear when she was just barely able to make out the long, slithering bodies of the snakes sliding up the walls of the abyss. For the first time, she began to appreciate the darkness around her, hoping that it would hide them from the snakes. Shaky pants heaved out of her aching chest as she looked up into the darkness, just beginning to hope that they might live.

A tiny glimmer of grey broke through the darkness above her, seeming almost like a bright light compared to the darkness of the chasm. A gasp of relief escaped her throat when she was hoisted upward and soon she found herself staring up at a clump of stars shining in the sky. Moments later, she could make out the edge of the abyss. Reaching out with her paw, she grabbed onto the side of the chasm and desperately began to pull herself up.

A slow, shuddering sigh tore out of her chest when she managed to haul herself over the edge and drag herself onto the sandy yellow ground. She let go of the vine only when she had taken several paces away from the Snake Pit and collapsed onto the ground. Dash soon fell down beside her, his sides heaving with relieved pants. They only dared to look up when a light, familiar voice broke through the silence of the night.

“You’re...you’re *alive!*”

Saderia paused and slowly looked up. Her eyes widened in shock when she found herself staring face to face with a shaggy brown dog with light brown eyes. A gasp escaped her throat. “Dingo!”

Dingo opened his mouth in astonishment, but before he could give life to any of the questions she could read in his stunned brown eyes, he shook himself and immediately began checking her over. “Did they bite you?” he demanded.

Saderia blinked. “The snakes? I...I think so...”

“Where?” he growled, his light brown eyes darkening with seriousness.

Shivering, Saderia gestured nervously to a bite on her back leg, chest, and back. “I...I think that’s all of them,” she stammered. “What... what do I do?”

“Those snakes are poisonous,” Dingo snarled. “You have to suck out the poison or you’ll die. Hold still,” he added before she could react. She let out a gasp of fear, but before she could protest, Dingo pushed up her head, bared his fangs, and dug them into the snakebite on her chest. Struggling to conceal a cry of pain, Saderia felt her claws dig into the ground until Dingo finally pulled away from her and spat out a mouthful of venom. She bit her lip to conceal another whimper when he did the same for her other bites.

Stepping away from her, Dingo rapidly turned to face Dash. “What about you?” he demanded. “Did they bite you?”

“I...I think so,” he murmured, hesitantly showing the bites to Dingo after a nervous glance at Saderia. Without hesitation, Dingo stepped forward and sliced open the wounds to suck out the venom, his light brown eyes narrowed with solemnity. As soon as he stepped away from Dash and checked them over once more, he turned to face them, his eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Saderia's heart thumped with anticipation and her mind whirled with a million questions, but before she could voice a single one of them, she was interrupted by a low, vicious growl.

Dingo's ears twitched and his head swung around to face the direction of the snarl. His tail flicked uneasily back and forth. "We have to get out of here," he muttered, glancing at them out of the corner of his eyes. "Come on, follow me. Don't worry," he added more softly. "I won't hurt you. I'll help you. I'll make sure you're safe."

Saderia's eyes widened as she painfully pulled herself to her paws. Staring up at him in shock, she struggled to keep up as Dingo began leading them away. Falling into step beside her rescuer, she tried to keep silent, relishing the feel of the sand beneath her paws instead of the damp, squishy mud of the Snake Pit. "What are you doing here?" she whispered. "How did you know we were in there?"

Dingo glanced at her as he darted through the sand dunes, his light brown eyes glinting in the moonlight. "Bone told me he pushed you in," he growled. "He did it to torture me, as always. After he left, I got the vine and tried to save you. Bone and the pack tried to stop me, but I managed to get around them."

"Thank you," Saderia whispered, her eyes glimmering with gratitude. "You saved us just in time. Those snakes were...were going to eat us alive!"

Dingo glanced at her with wide, stunned eyes. "So the pack's stories are true."

"I...I guess," Saderia stammered remembering the 'stories' that Bone, Rip, and Tear had mentioned earlier. She paused. "What exactly is the pack?"

"All of the dingoes except the ones that are outcasts," Dingo growled. "The ones that are trying to kill me."

Saderia's eyes widened and Dash looked up in shock.

"Why are they trying to kill *you*?" Dash exclaimed.

"I'm an outcast."

Saderia wasn't sure what that meant, but she decided not to ask as they raced across the sandy desert floor. After several minutes, she couldn't help but turn to him and whisper, "Why did you save us? I'm so grateful you did, but...why? That one dingo—Bone—seemed happy to push us in

without a second thought and those other dogs named Rip and Tear didn't seem to mind either."

Dingo muttered something she couldn't hear. After a long, silent moment, he murmured, "I saved you because...I've been watching you. Let's just say that...you remind me of someone I once knew, tiger."

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise, but before she could ask who, Dingo glanced over at her with a look of incredulity in his stunned light brown eyes.

"I've never known anyone who could survive the Snake Pit," he whispered.

"You helped us," she told him. "That's the only reason we're alive."

Dingo stared back at her with wide, astonished brown eyes, but before he could reply, he was startled by a low, dangerous growl. Saderia froze in her tracks when Dingo skidded to a halt, his ears straining to listen.

"What is it?" Dash whispered.

"Shh," Dingo hissed.

Saderia shivered, feeling the fur along her back start to bristle when she heard the dark, threatening growl echo from behind the sand dunes once more.

Dingo let out a silent snarl. "Bone," he muttered. Feeling her heart skip a beat at the mention of the cruel dark brown dingo, Saderia looked up and watched as Dingo gestured in another direction. "We have to find a way out of here. Bone and his followers are everywhere."

Saderia swallowed nervously and silently followed after him, ignoring the sting of her wounds and the frantic beating of her heart. After what Bone had done to them, she would rather die than see the murderous dingo ever again. She and Dash might have survived the Snake Pit, but if Bone was determined to hurt them to torment Dingo, she could only imagine what he might do to them next. Pushing herself to run faster, she rapidly followed Dingo across the desert floor, keeping her tail swept close to her body to avoid giving herself away.

The three of them ducked behind a sand dune, but before they could move, they were jolted by a loud, threatening snarl. Dingo let out a low, inaudible growl and turned around to lead them away, but before they could try to run, a familiar dark brown dingo leapt over the top of a sand dune and

bounded toward them. His amber eyes gleamed in the dim light as three dingoes trailed behind him, letting out warning snarls of their own.

Dingo whirled around to run away, but before he or Saderia and Dash could move, a sleek yellow dog raced in front of them and blocked their path. They whirled around to run, only to find themselves face to face with Bone as two other dingoes moved to surround them on all sides, trapping them in the center.

Bone's dark amber eyes widened in surprise when he saw Saderia and Dash. "How...?"

"Your plan didn't work, Bone," Dingo growled. He narrowed his eyes and dared to take a step forward. "Now get out of my way before I rip your throat out."

A long-haired, dusty brown dingo on their left let out a snort of surprise. "When did you get murderous?"

Dingo glared at him. "I am what I have to be, Rock."

Rock snorted. "You're not very good at it. We're going to kill you in a second."

Dingo narrowed his eyes while the yellow brown dingo standing on their right snarled, "How dare you show your face, outcast?"

Dingo whirled around to face him. "Look, I don't want to fight you, any of you, but if you lay a claw on one of the forest animals, I'll rip you to pieces."

The yellow one behind them let out a scornful snort. "What are they to you?"

"It doesn't matter," Dingo growled, glancing back at him out of the corner of his eyes. He turned around to face the dark brown dingo in front of him, his cold, narrowed eyes boring into Bone's. "If you want to fight, then go ahead and do it. I don't have all day."

Bone narrowed his eyes. "So be it." He gestured to the other dingoes with a sharp flick of his tail. "Attack!"

Almost instantly, the dingoes dove forward, letting out snarls of hate and fury. Dingo immediately leapt forward when one of them lunged toward Saderia and Dash, catching the dog with a sharp thud and managing to throw him away. He whirled around to face the other dingoes, but as he passed Saderia and Dash, she heard him whisper, "As soon as there's a way past them, run and don't look back. I'll find you again later."

Saderia's eyes widened as Dingo whirled around and lunged toward one of the dingoes, driving him back with a sharp scratch across the face. Backing up, he placed himself protectively in front of Saderia and Dash, dodging the blows of the other dingoes and driving them away from the two forest animals. One of the dogs leapt toward Dingo, leaving a huge space for them to escape. Saderia's heart beat frantically in her chest as she whirled around to face Dingo. Her eyes opened wide with distress at the thought of leaving him behind to face the dingoes on his own.

A loud yelp tore out of Dingo's chest when one of the dogs leapt toward him and dug their fangs deep into his shoulder. With a low growl, he yanked the dingo away from him and whirled around to face his attackers just as another dingo leapt toward him. Just barely managing to kick him away, Dingo let out a howl of pain when Bone lunged toward him and dug his sharp fangs into his throat. Saderia's heart skipped a beat, but before she could help him, Dingo tore himself out of Bone's grasp and backed away. Blood dripped out of his throat as he stood firmly in front of Saderia and Dash, refusing to move and leave them susceptible to the dingoes' attacks.

Dingo let out a low snarl as he glanced back at them, his light brown eyes flashing in the dim light. "Go!" he shouted.

Saderia hesitated one more time, her gaze locked on his. After what seemed like ages, she finally nodded and whirled around, grabbing Dash's tail to lead him away. Narrowing her eyes, she broke into a run and raced away from the attacking dingoes, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. A shiver racked her body when Dingo's loud, pained howl echoed through the desert, but she forced herself to keep moving. She looked back only when she reached the top of the closest sand dune to see Dingo fighting back fiercely against the four attacking dingoes. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Bone lunge at him with a loud, dangerous snarl and sink his fangs deep into his shoulder.

Dingo let out a snarl and shoved Bone away from him before raking his claws across the dark dingo's face. In the instant that Bone fell back, Dingo turned to look at them, his light brown gaze locking on Saderia's.

"I'll be fine," he called. "Just run! The pack is vicious!" He let out a yelp as a dingo leapt at him then tore himself away with a low, furious snarl. He looked back at them one last time.



“I’ll come back!” he shouted. “I’ll help you! I’ll make sure you live!”

# Chapter Twenty

## A Close Call

Saderia collapsed to the ground with a long, slow sigh. Her head drooped against the sand as her whole body went numb with relief. Dash painfully sank down beside her, letting his head fall to the ground as a long sigh slipped out of his mouth. Ignoring the stinging of her wounds, Saderia turned to look up at the starry sky before glancing back at her scarred body. Wincing, she tried not to look at the bloody wounds covering her back and sides and instead turned to look at Dash.

“Are you okay?” she whispered.

Dash glanced back at her, his amber eyes glimmering with pain and fear. “Is it even possible to be ‘okay’ after that?”

Saderia sighed. “I guess not.” She paused and let the silence spread out between them before murmuring, “Your wounds don’t hurt too bad, do they?”

Dash glanced up at the sky. “They’re bearable.”

“I suppose that’s...good,” Saderia replied, glancing at her paws.

Dash just shrugged and glanced back at her. “What about you? Your injuries don’t hurt too bad, either, do they?”

Saderia sighed and rested her head on her paws. “They’re bearable.”

Dash looked away, his gaze dull and distant as he stared out at the desert. His tail silently brushed hers as they looked out in silence, trying to ignore the stinging of their wounds and the sticky feeling of their fur. Shivering, Saderia tried to brush a clump of dried blood out of her fur with her tail before giving up and laying against the ground.

After several minutes, Dash finally let out a sigh and turned to face her, his amber eyes bright with curiosity. “Do you have any idea which way we should go after we start moving? Dingo said he’d find us later, but I don’t think it would be smart to just stay in one place with all the other dingoes around.”

Saderia blinked and shrugged. "I guess that's a good point, but I don't know which way we should go. I guess I could try using my Dream sense, but..."

Dash glanced up at the sky. "You might as well try it. It can't hurt, right?"

Saderia sighed. "I guess not."

Her eyes fluttered shut as Dash turned to face her and she felt his curious amber gaze on her fur. Ignoring it, she tried to decide where she even *wanted* to go. After so many days had passed in the desert, the thought of finding her family had grown less and less likely. Now that she had met Dingo and he had promised them he would come back for them, she wasn't even sure if she wanted to find her family anymore, at least for the time being. Even though she missed them, it suddenly seemed much more important to find Dingo again and learn more about the desert. Concentrating, she struggled to find a path that would lead her to Dingo and felt her heart leap in excitement when she felt a slight tug in a certain direction.

This time there was only one path.

Feeling a slight tingle of relief, she rested her head against her paws, grateful that she wouldn't be forced to choose. Opening her eyes, she stared out at the desert, feeling slightly more at ease. Now that she knew where Dingo was and which direction she should take to find him, she felt a bit more safe.

"Did you find a direction?" Dash asked, glancing down at her with inquisitive amber eyes.

Saderia glanced up at him and nodded. "Yes, and I think it leads to Dingo. We should rest tonight and then try to find him tomorrow. We shouldn't hurry, though. Dingo probably has other things to deal with and we're bound to run into him eventually. Besides, if we try to find Dingo any time soon, we'll probably find Bone, too."

Dash shivered and nodded. "All right. But how can we sleep after living through that?"

"Because we *did* live through it," Saderia replied. "Now come on, let's try to get some rest. We need to keep our strength up."

Dash sighed. "Fine. I just hope we have better luck from now on. It's been two weeks and the only thing we've managed to accomplish is

avoiding being killed.”

Saderia flicked him lightly with her tail, giving him a slight smile. “That is an accomplishment, Dash. We’ve been out here for two weeks and so far we’ve managed to survive everything this desert has thrown at us. If we can survive the first two weeks out here, we can survive another. Besides, if we do find Dingo again, he might be able to help us. He knows this desert way better than we do and he’ll be able to protect us from the dangers, like Bone and the Snake Pit.”

Dash looked down. “I suppose.”

Saderia rested her head on her paws, letting her eyelids droop with exhaustion. “Should one of us keep watch?” she murmured.

Dash shrugged. “I don’t really see the point anymore. If there’s dingoes around, they’re going to get us whether we’re awake or asleep. If they do attack, we’ll just have to fight them off and then run like we’ve been doing.”

“Good point.” Saderia let out a long, tired yawn. “I’m already half asleep anyway.” Giving Dash a gentle flick on his shoulder, she carefully curled her tail over her nose. “Goodnight, Dash.”

“Goodnight, Saderia,” Dash murmured back as he curled himself into a ball and rested his tail comfortably on her shoulder.

Smiling to herself, Saderia curled her paws in closer to her stomach and slowly drifted off into sleep, thinking about how lucky she was to have survived the awful pit and wondering how many more of her Dreams would start to come true.

Dark, eerie clouds hung over the sky, blocking out the silvery light of the moon. Saderia and Dash padded silently through the desert under the black, starless sky, their tails dragging soundlessly across the sandy ground. Saderia glanced dully out at the desert, barely even noticing the familiar sting of her wounds. After four days of walking and searching for their rescuer, she and Dash hadn’t found anything to point them to Dingo. Luckily, they hadn’t found anything to point them to Bone either and those four days of walking gave them plenty of time to recover from the wounds they had received in the Snake Pit.

Saderia’s amber eyes narrowed as she squinted through the dark desert. A frown spread across her face when she thought she was able to

make out a few splotches of dark brown against the sandy yellow landscape. Her dirty orange paws carefully slowed down until she stopped, holding up her tail in indication for Dash to pause. Glancing up at her, Dash frowned in confusion and gave his ragged brown tail a sharp flick of unease.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Look,” Saderia murmured, gesturing broadly toward the tiny black shapes in the distance. “That almost looks familiar.”

Dash squinted off into the distance. “It...kind of does look familiar.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “Do you want to check it out?”

“Yeah,” she murmured, taking a few quick steps forward. “Come on. Keep close to the ground.”

Dash nodded silently and crouched down closer to the ground as they began to move forward. Saderia’s tail trailed lightly behind her while her paws brushed soundlessly against the yellow brown sand. Her eyes narrowed as she slunk closer, being sure to hide behind large sand dunes in case she was walking into some sort of trap. Soon she was able to make out the dark, rocky color of the dark brown shapes and felt herself pause.

Frowning, she carefully slipped closer, feeling her instinct pull her toward the strange brown rocks. She stopped just a few feet away from them and let out a soft gasp when she recognized the familiar stones peeking out from within the surrounding sand dunes. A feeling of dismay tingled in her paws when she realized that somehow she and Dash had ended up right back at the place they had started from.

Her eyes peered quietly into the dark, shadowed dens surrounding the strange valley-like land. Just outside the closest dens sat an undisturbed pile of white bones that almost seemed to glow in the darkness of the night. Nothing stirred in the silent desert.

Saderia’s eyes gleamed in the darkness. “It’s that old dingo neighborhood we saw before,” she whispered.

She looked up, but before she could turn around to look at Dash, a low, gruff growl breathed against her ears, sending a jolt of terror down her spine.

“So it is, tiger.”

Whirling around, Saderia let out a scream of terror when she found herself staring right into Bone's glinting amber eyes. She fearfully began to back away as her heart beat rapidly in her chest.

"B-Bone," she stammered. "What are you doing here?"

Dash huddled closer to her with a look of pure terror as a slow, eerie smile spread over Bone's face.

He grinned. "This is my camp. You came just in time."

"This...this place was abandoned last time," she whispered. Her eyes were unable to look away from Bone's sneering face as he stalked closer to them.

Bone smirked. "I hope that's a fond memory for you, tiger."

Without warning, he lunged toward them, throwing Saderia to the ground and sinking his sharp, yellow fangs deep into her shoulder. Letting out a screech of pain, Saderia wrenched herself away from him and raked her claws across his face, grabbing Dash's paw as he helped her to her feet. Her eyes met Bone's for one brief moment before she whirled around and darted over the sand dune, her tail streaming wildly out behind her. Dash's paws hit the ground beside hers as they tore through the desert, their amber eyes wide with alarm.

Bone bounded after them, his cold snickering filling the thick air around them. Her heart beating wildly, Saderia struggled to get away, her paws thudding desperately against the ground and her wounds searing with pain. Glancing back, she let out a shriek of alarm when Bone bounded past them and landed right in front of them, his amber eyes glinting in the darkness. Skidding to a halt, Saderia and Dash leapt away from him as fast as they could, just barely managing to escape a strong swipe of his claws. Looking back, she fought to move faster, pushing her paws against the ground as hard as she could. When she dared to face the front, she let out a shriek of alarm when she found herself skidding right into the dingo camp.

All around the camp, dingoes slipped out of the tiny rock dens, their eyes glinting with surprise and excitement. Eager howls and growls echoed around the camp as Saderia and Dash skidded to a halt, their hearts pounding frantically in their chest. They whirled around and let out a cry of fear when they found themselves face to face with Bone. The dark dingo let out a low chuckle as he stalked forward, driving them deeper into the camp.

The other dingoes around them slowly began to surround them, blocking their every exit and letting out low, jeering laughs.

Saderia looked around wildly at the other dingoes, feeling the fur on her back begin to bristle in fear. She turned back to look at Bone and her eyes widened in horror when she read the triumph in his gleaming amber eyes. He let out a dark chuckle.

“You’re not getting away this time, forest food.”

Dingo bounded rapidly through the desert, his anxious light brown gaze scanning the sand dunes around him. He skidded to a halt at the top of a sand dune and glanced around, freezing in alarm when he caught sight of two small figures being chased into the dingo camp. His eyes widened in horror when he recognized the dirty yellow orange and dark brown fur of the tiger and lion.

“No!” he shouted.

His heart stopped as he watched Bone push them deeper into the camp. An overwhelming sense of fear and helplessness clouded his gaze as he watched the dingoes surround the forest animals with a hungry glint in their eyes. His paws itched to race forward and *do something*, but he had no chance. If he set foot in a camp full of hundreds of dingoes who hated his guts, he would be dead within minutes. There was no way he could survive showing his face in camp, much less getting away with the tiger and lion. A deep shiver racked his body. He was going to fail. Again.

Saderia and Dash slowly began to back up, their fur bristling and their eyes narrowed with fear. They whirled around when the dingoes behind them let out low, threatening snarls and found themselves staring into hundreds of cruel, gleaming eyes. Saderia whirled around to face Bone and felt her heart stop when she realized how close he had gotten. Her unsheathed claws dug deep into the ground in preparation for a fight.

“Bone,” she pleaded, struggling to hide the fear in her voice, “let us go!”

Bone just laughed and shook his head. “Sorry, tiger, but you’ve managed to evade me for way too long. I’ll tell Dingo where we bury you, so he can cry over your grave.” He smirked and flicked his tail. “Attack!”

The dingoes surged forward instantly, letting out loud howls of eagerness and excitement. Saderia tried to leap away, but before she could

move, she felt sharp claws dig into her leg and pull her to the ground. Whirling around, she raked her claws across the face of a yellow orange dingo and leapt to her paws. The instant her feet touched the ground, however, she was shoved roughly in the side and forced to stumble to the ground, her wounds searing with pain. Struggling to catch herself, she jumped away and lashed out at the dingoes. She turned and let out a shriek of alarm when one of them leapt at her from behind and pinned her to the ground.

She caught a flash of Dash being pushed into the sand before she raked her claws across the face of her attacker and pulled herself to her paws. Her tail lashed viciously back and forth as she turned to leap toward the nearest dingo, driving him back with violent swipes of her claws. She tried to lunge forward to sink her fangs into one of the dingoes' shoulder, but before she could move she was yanked back by sharp fangs. A screech of pain ripped out of her chest as she crumpled to the ground. Blood splattered across the sand as she tore her leg out of her enemy's grip and struggled to stand. Almost instantly, she stumbled backward and collapsed on her back when sharp claws struck her forehead.

Blood dripped into her eyes, blinding her to everything except the endless stream of red. Blinking rapidly, she shuffled her paws wildly across the sand, trying to force herself to leap to her paws and stand to fight. She fell to the side when a dingo lunged at her and raked his claws across her shoulder. Letting out a sharp hiss of pain, she ducked down and whirled around just in time to rake her claws across his chest. She barely had a second to pull away from her attacker before another one leapt at her, shoving her against the ground. Pulling her paws up, she tried to slash her enemy's face, but before she could make a move to protect herself, her paws were grabbed by another dingo.

Letting out a shriek of pain, she felt herself be dragged across the ground and thrown onto her belly. Her body screamed with pain as her head was slammed against the ground and sand stung the wounds covering her sides. A gasp of pain and fear choked out of her mouth. She struggled to pull herself up, but before she could move, rough paws slammed down on her own, holding her in place. Squirming desperately in their rough grasps, she let out a gasp as she was slid across the sand once again. Beside her, she



heard a yelp of pain when the dingoes shoved Dash to the ground and pinned his paws around him.

Her amber eyes widened in horror as she stared at her friend's bloody face. She opened her mouth to cry out, but was immediately interrupted by a dark, threatening growl. Her head whipped around to see where it had come from and her heart skipped a beat when she saw Bone towering over them, a cold, bloody sneer on his face. Feeling a shiver of terror, Saderia struggled frantically in her attackers' grasps, desperate to get away, but the dingoes pinned her paws all around her and kept her laying helplessly on her belly. Her heart stopped when Bone took a menacing step toward them and bared his fangs.

Closing her eyes, she buried her face into the sand below and shook violently in her enemy's grasp, waiting for the final blow. When it didn't come, she slowly looked up and blinked in surprise when she saw Bone freeze in his tracks. A frown creased her face when she read the frightened expression on Bone's face. His wide amber eyes were locked on a tiny droplet of water on the end of his nose. Saderia's eyes grew round with surprise as the entire clearing fell silent and stared at the startled dark brown dingo, waiting.

Just as Saderia's heart began beating again, she was startled by a cold, wet splash on her forehead. Looking up, her mouth gaped open in amazement when she saw dark storm clouds begin to gather above her. Glancing back down, she watched in surprise as Bone's amber eyes grew round with shock and fear. His mouth gaped open in surprise when he turned to look up, his tail seeming to freeze in midair. Saderia watched soundlessly as a tiny drop of water fell through the sky and landed on the very tip of Bone's nose.

A gasp tore out of his throat. "*Rain!*"

Saderia let out a gasp of surprise as the entire camp exploded into a wild, terrified frenzy. Terrified howls and shouts of alarm rang out around her, pounding against her eardrums. The claws of her attackers dug deep into her paws as they looked around wildly, their eyes filled with a mixture of disbelief and pure terror. Almost every dingo around her leapt to their paws and looked fearfully up at the sky, their tails lashing rapidly back and forth. A sharp cry pierced through the air.

"Run!"

In an instant, the dingoes leapt forward and began racing around the clearing as other cries and shouts split the air. Saderia let out a gasp of surprise and relief when the paws holding her down released her and her attackers went racing to their dens as fast as they could. Stumbling unsteadily to her paws, she looked around in shock as the camp around her erupted in panic. Screams and howls blasted her eardrums and the loud thundering of paws boomed around the dingo neighborhood. When the sky opened up and sent a shower of raindrops down on them, the dingoes let out yelps of fear and ran faster, howling as if the wet raindrops had burned them. Saderia stared in amazement as Bone took one look at them, took a few steps back, and then turned around and ran for his life.

Saderia whirled around to see Dash staring back at her with wide, shocked eyes as the raindrops slid his mane messily across his face. She watched as the rain slowly began to wash the blood off his scarred face before turning to face the dingo camp, hardly daring to move or even breathe. She almost couldn't believe what she was seeing. One minute the dingoes had seemed intent on ripping her throat out. Now they were running and howling in a complete panic. How could the dingoes be so afraid of mere rain?

Dingo felt an instinctual pang of terror as rain sprinkled down on him from above, terror that covered his initial shock that a storm had come in the first place. Apart from the Snake Pit, there was almost nothing the dingoes feared more than rain. Only a storm would make them flee from their kill like that.

Without hesitating, Dingo bounded into the camp and ignored the few remaining dingoes that were running for shelter. They could all see him, their number one most hated enemy, but so what? No one in their right mind would stop in the middle of a storm just to kill him.

As he bounded through the camp, the rain picked up and poured buckets of freezing water down on him as wind roared and whipped through the camp. The dingoes noticed him, of course, but their gazes just barely registered shock before they had passed him in their desperate race to shelter. Dingo ignored his growing fear of the storm and raced toward the injured forest animals.

Wind howled through the desert and rain pelted down from the dark, ominous sky, drenching Saderia's dirty, blood-soaked fur. The cool wet raindrops slipped down her face, washing the dirt and blood off of her scarred orange body. Blinking rapidly as water droplets quivered on her eyelids, she looked around and scanned the desert clearing in astonishment. Darkness cloaked the entire camp. Rain poured down on the desert below, splattering loudly against the rocky dark brown dens. The sandy ground below her slowly turned to mushy dirt and gritty mud.

Glancing up at the storm clouds in shock and amazement, Saderia felt her eyes stretch wide with disbelief. Her mouth gaped open in awe and a tingle of relief raced through her body when the cool drops of water splashed against her dry tongue. Beside her, Dash turned his gaze to the sky after shaking his wet mane off of his soaked face. A soft gasp of shock and relief escaped his throat. Saderia turned to him and met his stunned amber gaze. They paused to stare at each other in incredulity then jumped when they heard a loud, familiar voice echo from behind them.

"Tiger! Lion!"

Whirling around, Saderia let out a shaky cry of relief when she saw a familiar shaggy brown dog bounding toward them, his drenched tail waving wildly back and forth.

"Dingo," she gasped, feeling almost weak with relief.

Dingo skidded to a halt in front of them and glanced around at the camp, his long, damp fur swinging heavily back and forth. He whirled around when Dash let out a gasp of surprise.

"Dingo?" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? I thought the other dingoes were trying to kill you..."

"They won't notice me in a storm," he muttered distractedly, glancing at the frightened dingoes. With an anxious growl, he turned back to face Saderia and Dash, his eyes gleaming with seriousness and alarm. "Listen, we have to get out of here. *Now!*"

Saderia frowned. "Why? All the dingoes are running away from us."

Dingo turned to glare at her. "Are you blind? I don't care about the dingoes. We have to get away from this storm!"

She narrowed her eyes in confusion when she saw the fear glimmering in his eyes. "But why? Why are you and all the other dingoes

so afraid of rain?”

Dingo blinked at her in surprise. “Are you kidding? We could drown!”

Saderia’s eyes widened in shock. “What?”

Dingo shook his head. “Never mind, we don’t have time for this. Just follow me so we can get away from this place!”

Glancing around at the dingo camp and the rain falling all around it, Saderia nodded quickly and silently turned to follow Dingo, her mind whirling with confusion.

“Where are we going?” she whispered as he led them out past the two piles of damp white bones.

“My den,” Dingo growled absently, turning to look out at the desert around them. “We have to get out of this storm and away from these dingoes. Now *hurry!*”

Without giving her time to reply, he whirled around and darted off through the desert. Saderia immediately raced after him, her paws thudding rapidly through the mushy sand beneath her. Dash hurried after her, his soaked tail streaming out behind him in his haste to catch up. Trying to ignore the sting of her injuries, Saderia rushed to keep up with Dingo and continued running when she fell into step beside him, desperate to keep pace with him so as not to lose him.

Dingo’s light brown eyes rapidly scanned the desert, squinting to pierce through the dark onslaught of rain. His drenched paws barely touched the ground as he flew through the desert, shaking the long, damp hair out of his eyes to see. Wincing when a sharp raindrop stung one of her fresh wounds, Saderia struggled to keep moving despite the searing pain in her legs. Glancing up at Dingo with wide amber eyes, she wondered about the strange grimness and fear in his eyes and wished she could ask him another question. When she opened her mouth to speak, however, he barely glanced at her, too caught up in searching for the right direction.

Looking up at the sky and blinking when the rain stung her eyes, she slowly turned to look around and felt a tiny tingle of fear when she realized she could see nothing but darkness, rain, and mist. Sticking closer to Dingo and exchanging an anxious glance with Dash, she continued to race through the desert. Silence spread out between them, making Saderia’s fur begin to prickle with discomfort. Her anxious eyes met Dash’s and held his nervous gaze for a long time before she turned around to face the desert once more.

The wind whipped wildly through the desert, rustling her soaked fur and stinging her eyes with gusts of rain. Shivering with cold, she leaned closer to Dash, feeling his damp fur brush up against hers. She looked up at Dingo to ask him how long it would be until they reached his den, but she trailed off when she felt a strange sensation around her paws. Blinking rapidly, she looked down and let out a gasp.

In the minutes that had passed since they had left the dingo camp, the wet sand beneath them had turned into a tiny flow of dirty water. Her eyes widened in shock when she saw the water wash over her paws, completely submerging them in the gritty liquid. Her heart began to beat faster when she saw the water slowly begin to rise.

“D-Dingo...!” she called.

“I know!” Dingo called back, shouting to be heard over a loud gust of wind. “Just keep running and don’t look back! We have to get to shelter before it gets any higher!”

Dash’s eyes stretched wide with shock. “It...it never got this way in the forest!” he exclaimed.

“Lucky you,” Dingo growled, cutting his eyes at them as they ran. “You’re in the desert now, so get used to it. And from now on, if I tell you to do something, you do it.”

Thunder boomed in the sky and Saderia jumped, her heart beginning to beat faster as the rain poured down on them, refusing to let up. Her paws ached with pain and exhaustion when she picked them up out of the water and slammed them hard against the wet ground. A shiver of fear raced down her spine when she realized it was getting harder and harder to pick her paws up out of the water. She looked down and let out a tiny cry of fear when she saw the water gradually begin to rise up her legs. Turning frantically to look at Dingo, she let out a tiny whimper when she saw the fear in his light brown eyes. Was this why the dingoes hated rain?

Her heart skipped a beat when lightning split through the sky and thunder roared above her. Sharp shivers of fear coursed through her body when a rough current of sandy water poured toward them, soaking her legs and wetting the hair on her belly. She let out a cry of fear as she struggled to move her legs faster and was met only by the fierce resistance of the water. Her gaze swung around to Dingo as he picked his paws up far out of the

water, his gaze darting rapidly back and forth. The water just barely brushed a few tiny hairs sticking out from his light brown belly.

“Dingo!” she gasped.

“Don’t stop!” he snapped, glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes. “Ignore it. We’ve still got a long way to go!”

Swallowing fearfully, Saderia glanced down at the water and nodded meekly. Her paws floundered helplessly through the sandy water and her heart began to beat faster and faster. After just a few minutes of trying to wade through the rough current of sandy water, her legs ached with exhaustion. She desperately tried to force herself to keep moving even as the gritty water around her viciously stung the open wounds on her legs.

She leapt forward when Dingo bounded off to the left. She and Dash rapidly followed him with amber eyes wide with desperation. Squinting, they struggled to see through the flood and saw nothing but torrential rain, darkness, and the ominous shadows of sand dunes through the mist. She looked up at her rescuer with wide, fearful eyes when he skidded to a halt, but before she could ask him what was wrong, she was interrupted by a loud roaring sound. Whirling around, she stared in horror as a sand dune just a few feet away seemed to collapse, sending a wave of muddy water flowing straight toward them.

Saderia let out a shriek of fear and struggled to leap away, but before she could even put a paw forward, she was slammed by a strong surge of water. A strangled scream tore out of her throat as the floodwater knocked her down and dragged her under, filling her mouth with sandy water. Her eyes squeezed shut and her paws flailed desperately in the dark, murky water. She just barely suppressed a cry when the wet bits of sand floating around her stung the numerous wounds covering her body. Her blood swirled around in the dirty brown water, filling her mouth with the disgusting taste of sand and salt. Struggling not to cry out, she struggled frantically to get to surface, her chest burning with pain. Her paws thrashed wildly through the water, but the current swept her under, pulling her farther and farther away from the surface. A scream tore out of her throat when her lungs and chest exploded with pain.

Sand and water streamed into her mouth, but just when her eyes began to slip shut in defeat, she felt sharp teeth meet in her scruff and yank her upward. A gasp tore out of her throat when her head broke the surface

and the roar of rain once again filled her ears. Heavy pants heaved out of her chest as she struggled to bring air to her lungs and her eyes opened wide with alarm. Her paws thrashed violently back and forth, desperate to keep her from sinking again, until she heard a warning growl. Turning awkwardly, her body went numb with relief when she found herself staring into Dingo's stern, worried face and realized he was keeping her afloat.

Shivers raced down her spine as she forced herself to relax. Her gasps for air became slower as she went numb and she tried not to look at the rushing, muddy water all around her. A tingle of surprise coursed through her body when she glanced back and saw Dingo's legs kicking strongly through the water, pushing her out of the flood. Looking ahead, she let out a sigh of relief when she saw Dash standing at the top of a nearby sand dune, looking down on them with eyes full of terror and relief.

Saderia turned and felt her eyes widen in horror. She let out a scream of fear when she saw another surge of muddy water heading toward them. Dingo pushed her forward and closed his eyes as another rush of water raced over their heads, plunging them deep into the sandy flood. Saderia's paws thrashed wildly through the water, but Dingo never once let go of her and when she paused to squint through the murky flood, she realized he was slowly pulling her back to the surface. Holding her breath as best as she could, she struggled to remain still so as not to make it harder for him.

At last her head broke the surface. She tried to take a breath, but she was jolted by a rough wave that surged toward her and pushed her aside. She let out a cry of alarm as she and Dingo were jerked violently back and forth along the vicious, muddy current. A low, determined growl filled her ears as Dingo pushed them forward, paddling strongly through the current until she could see a high sand dune sitting just a few inches away from them. Saderia's heart leapt with hope when Dash came bounding forward and fearfully reached out to her to help her onto high land.

Reaching forward, she grabbed Dash's paw and suppressed a cry of alarm when Dash rapidly jerked her toward the sand dune. To her relief, her paws soon brushed the wet, sandy ground. A soft sigh escaped her throat as she pulled herself up and dragged herself up the sand dune beside Dash. Dingo let go of her only when she was safely on the dune and then crawled up himself, letting out shaky pants and shaking the damp sand out of his fur.

As soon as she reached the top of the dune, Saderia collapsed to the ground and started coughing violently. When she had finally managed to cough up as much of the gritty water as she could, she took a deep, shuddering breath and felt herself go numb.

She let out a yelp of surprise when Dingo tapped her roughly on the shoulder. Blinking in shock, she looked up into his shadowed light brown eyes. "Get up," he growled. "We can't waste any time."

"S-sorry," she stammered, pulling herself unsteadily to her paws.

"Come on," he growled before turning to bound away from them.

Dash darted forward and carefully pressed up against Saderia to help her to her paws. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

"I'm fine," she muttered, her eyes wide and hollow with fear. A shiver raced down her spine as she stared out at the dark, flooding desert. "Let's just get out of here. Now!"

Dash nodded and together they whirled around to follow Dingo, stopping only when they saw him standing at the base of the sand dune, his brown eyes narrowed with unease.

"Dingo?" Saderia called. She stepped hesitantly forward and winced when she saw strong currents of water tugging and smacking against the sand dune supporting them. A tingle of fear raced up her spine when she saw how close Dingo was standing to the violent surges of water. "What now?" she demanded.

Dingo turned around to glance at them. "We've got to cross this," he growled, glancing out at the endless currents of floodwater.

Saderia's eyes widened in dismay. "What? Isn't there any other way?"

"No," Dingo growled. "This entire sand dune is surrounded by currents and this is the best way to my den." He narrowed his eyes. "Now hurry up before the floodwater gets any higher."

Dash let out a frightened hiss. "We're doing the best we can!"

"Do better," Dingo snapped back. "Unless you want to die."

Saderia opened her mouth to reply, but had no time to get the words out before Dingo turned and launched himself into the rushing currents below. A terrified gasp ripped out of her chest when she saw his head disappear under the currents. She raced forward with Dash right beside her, stopping just on the edge of the water and searching the dark, murky depths



for any sign of their rescuer. A cry of shock escaped her throat when she looked up and saw his head break the surface several feet away. His light brown eyes gleamed with determination as he paddled his way forward.

“Come on,” he called. “I won’t let you die.”

Saderia exchanged a long fearful glance with Dash before taking a deep breath and slowly wading forward. She recoiled when her front paw sank into the deep, freezing waters below. Shaking herself violently, she took another deep breath, closed her eyes, squeezed her mouth shut, and raced into the water as fast as she could. The shock of cold water all around her sent violent shivers coursing through her body when her head slipped under. Using every bit of strength not to cry out, she tried to remain calm as she slowly began to paddle her way toward the surface. A sharp gush of dirty floodwater sent her spinning helplessly through the water, but even as she felt herself pushed further and further down, she fought to stay calm.

Finally her head broke the surface and she let out a gasp, trying frantically to force air into her lungs when she had the chance. She squeezed her mouth shut as another surge of water toppled over her head, but managed to fight her way back up again before she was pulled farther down. Desperately treading water, she struggled to breathe while rapidly blinking water droplets out of her eyes. After taking a deep, shuddering breath, she slowly began to swim forward, ducking under currents and trying not to let the fear get to her.

Glancing back, she let out a sigh of relief when she saw Dash paddling carefully through the water just a few feet behind her. Turning around, she forced her paws to move faster when she saw Dingo standing at the base of the sand dune, waiting for them. Searing pain coursed through the aching muscles in her legs, but she ignored the ache and the exhaustion dragging her down. When she finally splashed close enough to the sand dune, Dingo reached forward and dragged her onto it.

Crouching down on the ground, she took a few deep breaths to force air back into her lungs and tried to ignore the uncomfortable feeling of her damp fur slicked close to her body. Wincing at the wet sand clumped around her wounds, she turned around and jumped to her paws when she saw Dash swim closer to them. Reaching forward, she grabbed his paw and determinedly pulled him up onto the sand dune beside her. Dash gave her a grateful smile as he took in a deep, relieved breath and stumbled forward.

Struggling not to fall, Saderia staggered tiredly upward, fighting the exhaustion in her limbs. Her mind whirled with fear and tiredness as she dragged herself to the top of the sand dune and looked out at the flooding desert around them.

“How much farther is it to your den?” she gasped.

Dingo glanced out at the dark desert. “Not too far,” he panted. “We can make it.” He bounded over the side of the sand dune and launched himself forward into another current. “Come on!” he called as he began pushing his way through the dirty water.

Swallowing nervously, Saderia sucked in a deep breath and charged down the sand dune. She leapt into the water and instantly began pushing herself forward when she slipped under a current. Paddling as strongly as she could, she followed after Dingo, ignoring the burning pain in her legs and lungs. She heard a sharp splash behind her when Dash jumped into the water and rapidly paddled up beside Saderia.

Fighting their way through the current, Saderia and Dash looked up as Dingo slowly climbed onto a nearby sand dune. She opened her mouth to let out a sigh of relief then let out a cry of alarm when a surge of water raced forward and plowed into the sand dune, forcing it to collapse. Sand splattered the water as Dingo was swept away, his howl echoing through the misty desert.

“Dingo!” Saderia screamed. She kicked her legs as hard as she could, desperate to swim faster and help him. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw his head disappear under a wave. She opened her mouth to call out his name then let out a gasp when a violent surge of water rushed toward her. Before she had time to duck away, she found herself hurtling down into the murky water, her paws unable to carry her to safety. The water surged forward, carrying her with it and throwing her body carelessly back and forth. Squeezing her mouth shut, Saderia fought viciously against the current. A sharp shiver of fear coursed through her body when it dragged her farther underwater.

Her paws thrashed desperately through the water and her lungs burned uncontrollably. Agonizing pain shot through the muscles in her sore, aching legs, making her struggles weaker and weaker. Her eyes opened wide in desperation and her heart stopped when she saw something swim

toward her. Before she could cry out in alarm, she felt a paw reach down, grab hold of hers, and yank her upward.

Clinging desperately to the paw, Saderia let out a cry of relief when her head burst out of the water and she found herself floating helplessly next to Dash. Glancing at her friend with wide, scared eyes, she read the fear in his gaze. Looking out, she felt her heart beat faster with fear when she saw nothing but muddy water all around her. There was no sign of any sand dunes anywhere. And Dingo was nowhere in sight.

Gasping desperately, Saderia and Dash struggled to paddle forward. Saderia's eyes darted wildly back and forth until she finally spotted a sand dune sitting just a few feet away. Gesturing toward it, she splashed forward as fast as she could with Dash close beside her. As soon as they pulled themselves up onto the sand dunes, she turned to look around.

"Dingo!" she shouted. "Where are you?"

She whirled around when a soft, cracked voice sounded from behind her and let out a gasp of relief and disbelief when she saw Dingo slowly drag himself up the sand dune.

"Right...here..." he panted. A deep shudder raced through his body as he slumped forward, his light brown eyes dull with exhaustion. Shaking himself and sending droplets of water flying everywhere, Dingo gritted his teeth and glanced out at the desert, his harsh, labored breathing filling the air around them. "Let's go," he growled, barely taking a moment to rest. "We're almost there."

Saderia let out a long sigh and fought to catch her breath as she stumbled tiredly after him. Her sides burning and heaving with rapid gasps, Saderia staggered down the side of the dune beside Dash and jumped clumsily into the current. Her wet fur felt heavy as she forced herself to wade through the water, her eyes narrowed and focused on the next dune. Just barely managing to keep herself from slipping under, she tiredly pulled herself onto the sand dune and looked around, waiting for Dingo's instructions.

Dingo flicked his tail and led them to the left of the sand dune while she and Dash followed soundlessly behind. Letting out a sigh of relief, Saderia soon realized there was no water on the left side of the dune. Pausing on the damp sand, she stopped and looked around in confusion. Frowning, she watched as Dingo staggered toward one of the closer sand

dunes, his light brown eyes wide with relief. She let out a sharp gasp of surprise when she squinted and made out a dark brown stone sticking out of the sand dune. Her eyes widened with hope when Dingo painfully pushed aside the large stone and revealed a gaping entrance in the side of the sand dune.

Her heart leapt. "Is that your den?"

"Yes," Dingo called, just barely managing to make himself heard over the pounding rain. "Hurry inside! The water could be about to rise and flood this place any minute!"

Saderia's eyes widened in alarm as she stumbled forward, her sight blurring with exhaustion. She felt Dingo's soft, wet paw on her back as he pushed her into the dry den and she heard a soft sigh of relief behind her when Dash stumbled inside. A low, rumbling noise filled the air when Dingo crept inside and sealed the den by pushing the large stone back over the entrance, preventing the water and rain from seeping inside.

Feeling suddenly numb with relief and tiredness, Saderia was barely aware of her surroundings. Her eyes slipped shut and she stumbled blindly forward, stopped from falling only by the touch of Dingo's gentle paw. She leaned against him and let out a sigh as he led her forward and helped her onto some sort of smooth surface. She glanced blurrily up at him as she stumbled onto her belly and just barely managed to make out his light brown eyes staring tenderly back at her.

"The flood can't get us in here," he murmured as she started to drift off. "You're safe."

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Explanations

Terrified green eyes glimmered in the dim light, hollow and unblinking. Water streaked down his dirty orange fur as Makero stared out at the flooding desert. His tail flicked anxiously back and forth. He blinked when a soft paw brushed over his and held it comfortingly against the wild green grass. Looking up, he read the sorrow and fear in Karenisha's amber gaze as she struggled to remain confident.

She let out a sigh. "They're resourceful, Makero. They'll find somewhere to take shelter out there."

Makero let out a long, shaky sigh. "I guess," he murmured. His tail flicked across the grassy forest floor one more time when he caught sight of the damp leaves of the trees behind him. Rainwater streaked down his face and soaked into the grass below him while his drenched fur clung to his sides. Remembering the danger he had endured trying to fight the currents and find his way back to the forest where he would be safe, he wondered just how hard Saderia and Dash must be fighting just to stay alive. They didn't have a safe forest to run to.

"Hang on, you two," he whispered, narrowing his eyes against the torrent of rain. "You have to make it."

A soft groan escaped Saderia's lips as she slowly opened her eyes, seeing nothing but dark, blurry surroundings all around her. Blinking rapidly, she cautiously lifted her head and looked around. Her eyes widened with fear and surprise when she found herself laying on a strange, smooth rock in an unfamiliar den. Frowning in confusion and a hint of unease, she carefully looked down at the smooth stone she was laying on, pressing her paw up against its sandy surface. She slowly ran her paw across the sandy stone, finding almost no ridges in it at all.

Looking down at herself, her eyes widened when she saw her yellow orange fur and realized how different it was. Unlike other times, she

could actually see her bright orange color; before, it had been dulled with dirt and dust. Her fur seemed fluffy and soft, marred only by a few ragged scars running across her back, sides, and chest. The once gruesome wounds were now just long, jagged lines; all the blood that had clung to their fur seemed to have disappeared.

Narrowing her eyes in confusion, she looked around at the den around her, letting her eyes scan over the rocky, dark brown walls around her and the sandy ground below. She could see small, hollowed-out rocks filled with fresh water sitting against a wall of the den. When she glanced in the corner near her stony sleeping place, she spotted a strange brown book and an old pink ribbon. Frowning and feeling a tiny shiver of panic, she looked down and gasped when she spotted a long-haired, shaggy brown dog lying on the floor beside the stone.

Her heart skipped as all the horrible memories from last night flooded her mind: the dingoes attacking her, the storm, Dingo running to help them, the floodwater, the feeling of being swept away under a surge of thundering water, watching Dingo be swept away by a current, and finally collapsing on the smooth stone in his den. Her eyes opened wide with surprise as she stared down at her rescuer. Looking around at his den, she felt an overwhelming sense of relief, knowing that she might finally be safe.

She turned around at the sound of a soft yawn beside her and found herself staring into Dash's eyes.

Dash blinked several times before lifting his head and looking around, his mouth opening in amazement and wonder. "This..."

"We're in Dingo's den," Saderia said quietly. "After the flood."

Dash's eyes widened in surprise. "The flood...we made it!"

She smiled slightly. "I told you we would be okay."

Dash paused then smiled sheepishly back. "Yeah, I guess you were right." He hesitated. "You are okay, though, right?"

Saderia nodded, but when she tried to smile, she couldn't help but wince when she moved her paw and a searing pain exploded in her muscles. "I'll be fine," she said, frowning at her paw. "I just need some time to rest." She glanced back at her fur and managed a smile. "At least we're not as dirty anymore. Are you okay?"

Dash nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." He pricked his ears and peered over her shoulder. "What about Dingo? He's here, right?"

Saderia nodded and glanced over at the sleeping canine lying just inches away from the stone she and Dash were laying on. Her gaze studied his sleeping form; it was the first time she had seen him this close without having to run for her life. Wincing, she studied the scars lining his furry brown face and back and wondered if he had got them from Bone or one of the other dingoes. Her eyes narrowed with wonder as she stared at her sleeping savior, wondering why the other dingoes hated him so much and why he had saved them. He had fought the dingoes and the flood just to save their lives when he didn't even know their names...

She blinked and watched as Dingo slowly opened his eyes and glanced drowsily around the den. He let out a long, soundless yawn as he slowly pulled himself to his feet, exposing his long, white fangs. He blinked several times before slowly turning to look at them. The instant his eyes fell on Saderia's face, he let out a gasp and almost jumped back, his eyes growing wide with shock. She blinked in surprise when she thought she saw a hint of pain flash in his eyes before he calmed down and wrapped his tail over his paws. After a moment of staring at the ground, he reluctantly looked up at them with guarded light brown eyes.

"Are you two all right?" he asked. "Still tired?"

Shrugging, Saderia tried to ignore his strange behavior as she stared up into his eyes. "We are still tired, but we're fine."

He sighed. "Good. Are you hungry? I could try to go out and catch you something if you want, but there's usually not much out after a flood."

Saderia frowned, wondering what he meant by 'catch' and what kind of food he was talking about. "No, we're fine," she murmured, deciding not to dwell on it. "I mean, we're sort of hungry, but it's not unbearable."

"All right." Dingo grimaced as he slowly pulled himself to his aching paws and padded stiffly over to the two hollowed rocks on the side of the wall. After taking a quick sip of water from one of them, he gestured to the other. "You can have some water if you want. I guess you've probably seen enough of that, though, huh?"

Saderia glanced at the water in the rocks. "Is that water fresh from the flood?"

"Yes. After you fell asleep, I snuck outside and filled it up with rain before the floodwater could rise. Flash floods are the only time to get water

in the desert and nobody passes it up. After all, it only rains once or twice every year and sometimes there's a two or three year drought."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock, but she tried not to show her surprise as she painfully picked herself up and padded toward the rocks. Trying to ignore the searing pain in her muscles, she stumbled forward and bent down to lick up a few drops of water. Dash quickly followed her and once he had lapped up enough water, he slowly sat back to stare at Dingo. A silence spread over them as they all watched each other, not quite sure what to say.

Glancing around at Dash and Dingo, Saderia finally felt the need to break the silence. Clumsily extending a paw, she stammered, "I...I guess we never introduced ourselves before. I'm Saderia, the Princess of the forest and this is Dash who's...kind of the Prince. We're both ten years old and we've been out here for...two weeks and five days looking for our parents and the other forest animals."

Dingo blinked in surprise. "Those are odd names. Are Princess and Prince sort of like Leader and Second in Command or something?" He shook his head. "Never mind. I'm Dingo. Twelve years old." He frowned. "What are you doing in the desert at all? I know there was something weird going on in the forest and all the forest animals left, but why exactly did you do that? And why are you two out on your own?"

Saderia paused. "It's kind of a long story. If we tell you our story, will you tell us yours?"

Dingo hesitated. "That depends what kind of story you mean. What exactly do you want to know?"

"Everything," she replied.

Dingo paused for a long time and studied them carefully with cautious light brown eyes. "All right," he said after several long moments. "I'll tell you about the desert if you tell me who you are, what you're doing out here, and what happened to your forest."

Saderia managed a slight smile as she began telling him about her history and about how she, as Princess, was expected to rule the forest alongside her royal parents, the King and Queen. She briefly described meeting Dastarius and saving her parents from his dungeon before she began explaining how she had met Dash and why he was now considered part of their family. Her smile turned into a grimace as she turned to the



grim story of how she and Dash had ended up in the desert. After thinking for a long moment, she finally launched into a long tale about how the hunters had invaded her home. She explained that her royal parents had eventually convinced the forest animals to leave their home behind in order to escape. She finished by explaining how she had gotten lost and how long they had been trying to find their way back to their family.

Dingo's eyes stretched wide with surprise and amazement as they continued their story. When they finished, he simply stared at them in shock for a long time. After several minutes, he glanced down, murmuring, "Wow. That's an impressive story."

"Will you tell us about the dingoes now?" Saderia pleaded.

He sighed. "Fine. Where would you like me to start?"

She thought for a moment. "Who are your parents and family members?"

He snorted. "*That's* what you want to know?"

"It's a start," she defended herself.

"Fine." He rolled his eyes and let out an annoyed sigh. "Well...my mother is Sand and my father is Dagger, Leader of the pack."

Saderia frowned in confusion, wondering if a Leader was anything like a King. She shrugged it off and looked up as Dingo continued.

"I have three older brothers," he muttered. "Bone, Rip, and Tear."

Saderia's mouth gaped open in shock. "Bone's your *brother*?"

"Unfortunately," Dingo growled.

Saderia stared at him, her amber gaze stunned. "He's your own brother and he's trying to kill you?"

Dingo nodded. "Family doesn't really mean anything to him, Saderia. It's not that surprising to me."

"Wow," she murmured. "Aren't Rip and Tear those dingoes that usually attack us with Bone?" She paused uneasily. "What are they and your parents like? I mean, I know Rip and Tear attacked us, but...well, all of them seemed to attack us. Are they...like Bone?"

Dingo sighed. "No, not really. I mean, they hate me just like the rest of them do, but not nearly as much. Rip's usually somewhat decent to me and other dingoes except for when he hangs out with Bone. He's more or less Bone's minion and whenever he hangs out with him, he ends up acting a lot meaner to me and everyone else to try to impress him. Tear really isn't

all that bad either. He hangs out with Rip most of the time and prefers to stay out of disputes. The only reason he even attacks anyone at all is because Bone and the others tell him to.

“As for my parents,” he went on, “what exactly can I say about them? I barely know them. Dagger is a lazy idiot who would just as soon get someone to wake up for him than do it himself. He’s probably a murderer, though that’s all been covered up and forgotten about by now. Sand... well, I really don’t know much about her at all. She left me and my siblings to fend for ourselves a few weeks after we were born, like all mothers do in the pack. I haven’t really had much to do with her and neither have any of my brothers.”

Saderia nodded slowly, her amber eyes narrowed with distress. She couldn’t help but notice the way he called his parents by their names rather than ‘Mom’ or ‘Dad’. Did all dingoes do that? Did all dingo mothers really stop caring for their pups when they were so young? Her eyes narrowed with confusion and amazement. If Dingo’s father really was like a King, how could he have done something as evil as murder?

“What are the dingoes like?” she asked. “They call themselves ‘the pack’ right?”

“Right. The pack controls everything in the desert. I’m sure some of them would even like to think they control the sun. Dingoes that are tough, cruel, and powerful live in the pack. The other dingoes that the pack doesn’t like or want, the ones that don’t agree with the pack’s laws, get thrown out. They’re called outcasts. The pack starves the outcasts and if they catch sight of one, they hunt it down and kill it.”

Saderia’s mouth gaped in shock. “The pack really treats other dingoes like that?”

Dingo shrugged. “Yeah, of course they do. I don’t think they really think of outcasts as real dingoes anyway. According to the pack, they probably don’t deserve the title.” He sighed. “The pack’s only rules are survival of the fittest and kill or be killed. The pack encourages violence and murder. If a dingo doesn’t agree with that and follow the pack’s laws, they’re instantly hated and cast out as outcasts. The pack can’t stand dingoes that are different from them. That’s why I’m an outcast.”

“You’re an outcast?” Saderia exclaimed. “But...how did that happen exactly? Have you always been one?”

Dingo sighed. “No. I just recently got exiled. See, the pack’s been looking for a reason to exile me for years. When I fought Bone to keep him from killing you two...they found it.”

Saderia felt a surge of guilt. “So it was our fault you were exiled?”

Dingo looked down. “No, Saderia. The pack was just out to get me. If I hadn’t been exiled for saving you two, I would have been exiled for something else. It’s not like life is any worse for me as an outcast anyway. I was the pack’s number one most hated dingo in the desert from day one. Even when I was in the pack, dingoes were trying to kill me. Now that I’m an outcast, they’ll just feel more liberated doing it.”

Saderia blinked in shock, wondering how any society could exist where murder and violence seemed rampant and where dingoes were treated like prey just for thinking differently. Shaking her head, she looked down for a moment before murmuring, “You...you mentioned a Leader and a...Second in Command? What exactly do those titles mean? What is a Leader and Second in Command?”

Dingo shrugged. “The Leader of the pack controls everything. He makes every decision and the pack is expected to follow unquestioningly. He rules over the desert and supposedly enforces the so-called ‘laws’ of the pack. Second in Command is a dingo the Leader chooses to take his place when he dies. Leader and Second in Command are the two most powerful positions in the pack. Dagger acts as Leader, but he’s mostly faded out of the picture ever since he chose his Second in Command last year: Bone.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in surprise. “Bone helps lead the pack?” Blinking rapidly, she realized that Leader and Second in Command must be kind of like King or Queen and Princess or Prince. Could the dark, evil dingo that had tormented them really be in charge of the entire pack? “Wait...Bone’s your brother and the Leader’s son, right? Do the Leader’s cub—er, *pups*—always become Second in Command?”

Dingo shook his head. “No. That’s usually the way it works, but it doesn’t always happen that way. A dingo named Fang was Second in Command long before Bone and he wasn’t related to us. Bone took his place when he died.”

“Oh,” Saderia murmured softly.

“Bone pretty much controls everything now,” Dingo muttered. “Dagger’s probably going to die soon, anyway, especially with Bone and

his friend plotting to kill him.”

Saderia’s eyes widened in alarm and Dash let out a gasp of shock.

“Dingoes are plotting to kill the Leader?” Dash exclaimed. “His own son?”

Dingo looked up and nodded. “Yeah. It’s nothing new. Dagger’s been leading the pack for...over twenty years. Everyone’s sick of him by now. Bone became Second in Command just a year ago and he’s probably already getting sick of being second best. I’m actually kind of surprised he hasn’t killed him yet, but I suppose it’s a good thing he hasn’t. I might not like Dagger, but I do kind of want him to keep living so that Bone doesn’t become Leader. I mean, Dagger’s cruel, but at least he’s too lazy now to create any more havoc. If Bone ever becomes Leader...well, let’s just say nightmares are sweeter. I can’t even begin to imagine all the things he’ll do to feed his little ego, but I know that if I’m still alive...it’s going to be bad for me.”

“Wow,” Saderia murmured, feeling a slight, disturbed shiver race down her spine as she thought about how strange and lawless the pack seemed. “It all seems...surreal. Do the other dingoes really treat you and other dingoes that way? And do they really have no care for each other that they hurt and kill their own kind? Does the pack even treat its own members nicely?”

“Not really,” Dingo growled. “The pack members don’t trust each other. I can’t think of one reason why they should. Every day they all hang out with each other and get along fine most of the time, but it doesn’t really take much to set one of them off. They all go out to have fun and have playful fighting competitions and act like great friends, but if any one of them has even a minor disagreement with another, it doesn’t take much for it to spiral into a fight. Even dingoes who act like close friends turn on each other in an instant, especially if one of them shows any sign of being ‘different’ like me. Once they start to hate each other, the entire pack seems to take sides and get involved. If they really start to despise each other enough to kill each other...it’s all too easy for them to do it and get away with it.”

“What do you mean?” Saderia asked.

Dingo sighed. “The pack allows two dingoes to kill each other in camp if both dingoes and the Leader agree. They call it a ‘fair’ fight to the

death. If everyone agrees, the whole pack gathers and watches them fight until one of them kills the other. And then they all just calm down and go back to what they were doing. Nothing happens to the murderer.” He shook his head. “Even if they didn’t have ‘fair’ fights, they would still be able to kill each other and get away with it. Nobody really cares if someone kills someone else unless it’s someone a dingo with power would prefer to keep alive. If two dingoes have a disagreement, one can just as easily push the other into the Snake Pit or...or find them out in the desert and kill them and then...blame it on outcasts...” He blinked several times and looked away, his eyes suddenly distant and dull.

Saderia stared at him in shock. Dingoes really pushed their own kind into that awful Snake Pit? Ignoring a deep shiver of fear, she noticed the forlorn look in Dingo’s eyes and frowned, feeling a tingle of sorrow and unease. She couldn’t help but wonder what he was thinking. Hesitantly reaching out, she carefully brushed her paw against his shoulder to comfort him then paused when he jumped back and pushed her away.

“They always solve all their problems with fighting and...killing?” she whispered.

Dingo nodded darkly. “Yep. The pack doesn’t believe in mercy and it despises dingoes who are ‘different’ or ‘weak’. You have to be ruthless to stay in the pack or else they throw you out to die. With dingoes like Dagger and Bone in charge, nobody can ever really win except them.” He sighed. “Is that all you wanted to know? Or do you have any other questions?”

Saderia paused. “Well...why do the dingoes hate us so much?” she asked. “I mean, I know they hate outcasts and dingoes who are different, but why us?”

“Because you’re forest food,” Dingo replied simply. “I’m sure you’ve heard them...and probably me...call you that. The pack hates you because they think they’re superior to the world and that everyone is beneath them. They think of you as nothing but oversized prey that doesn’t deserve to live as much as they do. That’s why they hate everything. That’s why they hate outcasts, that’s why they hate me, and that’s why they hate you.”

Saderia nodded slowly, trying not to wince at the sound of his words. “But that dingo, Bone...he wants to kill *us* specifically just to hurt you?”

Dingo let out a long sigh. "Bone would do *anything* to hurt me. He wants to break me before he kills me." Dingo looked down, a weary, faraway look in his dull brown eyes. "I suppose I should apologize for all you've been through. It's probably my fault that Bone's done such horrible things to you over the last few days. If I hadn't gotten close to you or watched you, he probably wouldn't have even noticed you."

Saderia's heart skipped a beat when she saw the dull look in his eyes and noticed the way his shoulders slumped in defeat. Taking a step forward, she sat in front of him with a sympathetic amber gaze. "It's...it's not your fault," she said softly. "Bone was the one that hurt us, not you. You *saved* us. If it wasn't for you...we wouldn't even be here. Besides, after you saved us a few times, we ended up being the ones looking for you. We wanted to know more about you."

Dingo looked down. "I should have listened to Rip. He tried to tell me not to get close to 'the forest food'." He shook his head. "I should have never gotten involved."

"No, it's okay," Saderia said quietly. "Listen, even before you started trying to save us...I think Dash and I were searching for you even though we didn't know it."

Dingo glanced up at her in confusion. "What? That doesn't make any sense."

Saderia bit her lip and glanced back and forth between Dash and Dingo before murmuring, "It does if you know about this...power I have." Dash turned to stare at her in surprise as she explained, "When Dash I first got lost, we tried to find our way back to our parents. I have this strange sort of instinct that pulls me in the direction it thinks I should go. When I tried to find my parents, there were two paths that I had to pick. I think one of them was leading us to you."

Dingo blinked in bewilderment. "Huh? What kind of 'power'? How could you have possibly been led to me when you didn't even know me back then?"

Saderia exchanged a glance with Dash before turning back to Dingo. "Listen, this might sound crazy, but it's true. Normally, I'm not supposed to tell anyone about this, but...I think you deserve to know."

As Dingo watched, mystified, she carefully began to explain how she could see the future in Dreams and how she could sometimes sense

what others were feeling. She told him how she had been having Dreams about him and the desert long before she even knew it existed and explained how her special Dream instinct had the ability to guide her in the right direction in real life. After a slight hesitation, she began telling him about the tomb of her oldest ancestor, the scroll inside, and the fact that the power of Dreams ran in her royal family. She briefly told him about the prophecy and how both she and Dash were a part of it before trailing off and waiting anxiously for his reaction.

Dingo stared at them for the longest time, opening his mouth as if to say something and then closing it again. After several moments, he finally blinked and murmured, "Wow. That...that's some story." He shook his head. "Now I've seen it all. Prophesized forest food. Sorry," he added quickly. "Saying forest food is just a habit."

"It's okay," Dash said. "After almost three weeks in the desert, we're just about used to being called food."

"So you...dreamed about this place even before you saw it?" Dingo exclaimed, looking at Saderia in disbelief.

She nodded meekly. "Yes, I saw lots of things in those Dreams. I even saw the moment when you started fighting Bone to protect us. I didn't understand them at first and I didn't know what they meant, when they would happen, or why they would happen...but I still had them and I still remember them now."

"Wow," Dingo repeated, shaking his head as if to clear it. "I had no idea anything like this existed."

"Yeah..." Saderia murmured absently. She paused distractedly then looked cautiously up at Dingo. "Dingo...can I ask you a question?"

He blinked. "I guess. What is it?"

She looked down. "It's...it's something I heard in my Dreams," she murmured. Glancing back up at him, she nervously met his gaze. "Who's Claw?"

Silence.

Dingo instantly froze at her words, his light brown eyes stretching wide with shock. Saderia glanced at him uneasily, feeling her heart skip a beat when she read the look of pure horror on his face. The air seemed to thicken as the long, uncomfortable silence stretched out around them, threatening to choke them with discomfort.

“How do you know about Claw?” Dingo whispered.

“I...I heard her name in a few of my Dreams...” she stammered.  
“Who...?”

She broke off when a low, furious growl rumbled in Dingo’s throat. Her eyes widened and Dash immediately stepped in front of her, his eyes narrowed with unease and uncertainty as he prepared for some sort of fight.

“Claw was my sister,” Dingo spat out. His claws scraped against the sandy floor of the den as he whirled around and began stalking toward the entrance, his tail still and his movements stiff and cold.

“Where are you going?” Saderia called, her eyes widening with alarm.

Dingo didn’t answer except to growl, “Stay there,” before he threw aside the dark brown slate blocking the entrance and slipped outside. Before Saderia could cry out or ask him to wait, he took one last look at them and bounded off into the sand dunes, disappearing into the vast desert.

Saderia could only watch him leave, her eyes slowly growing dull with sorrow and understanding.

“What’s his problem?” Dash hissed, glaring anxiously at the entrance to the den.

Saderia just shook her head. “Claw was his sister,” she whispered.  
“And I know she’s dead.”

It was irrational, but Dingo had to get away to breathe so he wouldn’t lose it. It wasn’t the forest animals’ fault that what had happened to Claw happened and that Bone and the others had never stopped taunting him about it. They weren’t to blame for any of that. He knew he shouldn’t get so angry and upset about it after so much time had passed, but he just couldn’t help it.

Even when he had tried to do something decent and help the forest animals, he couldn’t escape the grief. When he had awoken and sensed their presence on the stone then seen Saderia, in his mind he had seen Claw, for just a moment. If those kinds of thoughts were going to keep bothering him, he would be even worse off than before. He couldn’t replace Claw or erase the sorrow he felt and he was an idiot to have tried. He had just destroyed his whole life for two lost pieces of forest food.



With a groan, he closed his eyes and tried to shake those miserable thoughts away. They weren't true, anyway. He hadn't been trying to replace Claw and he was glad he had saved the forest animals. Their story was interesting and he had always wondered about what life in the forest was like and if it was better than life in the desert, but it was more than just the forest's way of life that intrigued him. The tiger's spirit had drawn him to them and despite the fact that Saderia reminded him of his sister, he hadn't wanted to use her as a replacement. He had just wanted to help the one who reminded him so much of Claw and who seemed so determined to live.

He sighed. It wasn't them he was mad at; it was himself. Ever since last year, he had been bad-tempered, angry, and depressed. No wonder the pack had treated him like a storm cloud. Why did he have to get so angry when the forest animals mentioned Claw? He shivered as he remembered the shock of hearing Saderia speak her name. It had been so unexpected; they weren't supposed to know about her and how he had failed to protect her in the past. This was supposed to be a clean start, one where everyone around him didn't think he was a failure.

Trying to ignore a tinge of pain and defeat, Dingo stopped at the top of a sand dune and looked out at the desert with a long, weary sigh. It was the same sand dune he had collapsed on about a week after Claw had died, the same dune where he had finally stood up and made up his mind not to give up even when all hope was lost. His head drooped; he knew he should go back to Saderia and Dash and leave his annoying temper behind. They still needed his help and he wasn't making it any easier for them by being such a jerk.

Even as he thought it, he could almost hear Bone's voice in his head, mocking him for the fact that his only reason for living came down to looking after forest food. He violently shook the thought away. Maybe it wasn't a lot to anyone else, but he still wanted to help them. He *had* to help them. They were still in danger and he would rather die than let someone else he cared about suffer like Claw had. He would die a thousand times over to stop Bone from claiming another victim and winning *again*.

The tiger, Saderia, was kind and brave and the lion, Dash, was friendly and protective. How could he just ignore the forest animal replica of himself and Claw? The forest animals deserved to have answers and to have someone to protect them and help them find the rest of their family. If

he could help them, he should. Claw would probably expect him to help out anyone in need. As the thought flickered through his mind, he managed a weak smile before turning around and facing the faraway den he had fled. After taking a deep breath, he raced back to his den, determined to help the ones he cared about.

Saderia looked up as the rock covering the entrance of the den slowly began to move. A smile spread across her face when she saw Dingo step delicately into the den, his eyes wide with sadness and regret. Her tail flicked happily in greeting when Dingo looked up at them and cautiously padded toward them, his head low and his tail dragging between his paws.

"You're back," Saderia called, smiling weakly and apologetically as Dingo crept closer to them. Glancing to her right, she noticed that Dash seemed relieved to see their rescuer, as well, even though he had seemed worried before.

Dingo felt a pang of guilt when he realized just how happy they were to see him even after he had stormed out of the den. "I...I'm sorry," he stammered as he cautiously sat down beside them. His gaze locked on his paws. "I always thought I could control my temper a bit more than the pack, but...I guess not."

"She's your sister," Saderia whispered. "We understand."

Dingo's eyes flashed in the dim light. "You know what happened then?"

Saderia hesitated. "I know she's..." She trailed off nervously, not wanting to upset Dingo again.

Dingo winced and briefly closed his eyes. Saderia watched him nervously as he let out a sigh and slowly pushed himself to his paws. His tail dragged listlessly across the sandy floor as he padded over to the odd brown book and bright pink ribbon sitting in a corner of the den. Stroking the pink ribbon and letting it slip through his paws, he murmured, "Yes. Claw is dead."

Saderia looked down. "I'm sorry. You don't have to talk about it if hurts you this much."

Dingo let out a long, shaky sigh. "I'm fine now, Saderia. When you asked about her, it just... brought back memories." He took a deep breath and turned around to face them. "Do you want to hear about her or not?"

Saderia hesitated before slowly pulling herself to her paws and padding closer to Dingo. She sat down in front of him while Dash slipped up beside her, their eyes trained on Dingo.

“If it doesn’t bother you, then yes,” she murmured.

“Fine.” He paused, took another deep breath, and let it out slowly. His gaze wandered to the strange brown book and the pink ribbon and a tinge of pain and sorrow trickled into his dull light brown gaze. Wrapping his paw tightly around the ribbon, he stared dully at the soft pink fabric and murmured, “Claw was...amazing. She was brave and kind and tough and strong. She was...the only one who ever cared enough for me to be there for me. She said that we would always stick together and look after each other. And I tried to look after her...I really did, but...it wasn’t enough. I messed up. I failed to protect her when she needed it the most.

“Claw was my closest friend from the time we were pups. She taught me how to fight and convinced me not to give up even when the entire pack turned on me for being ‘different’. She stood up for me whenever Bone or Rip or Tear would say something mean to me and snapped at any other dingo who tried to pick on me or attack me. She was the only one who ever defended me. She was the only reason I even bothered to try to survive.”

He let out a long sigh. “She was like me, a ‘different’ dingo who thought fighting and killing was wrong, but she hid it from the pack. She was so nice and kind-hearted and she tried to get the other dingoes to act nicely and to stop being so violent, but the only thing she could do was sit back and watch all the violence unfold around her. There probably wasn’t a day in her life that she didn’t have to watch someone in her pack hurt someone else or get hurt themselves. She didn’t have a single friend that managed to outlive her except me. I loved her and counted on her so much. Probably too much.”

He took a deep breath and looked down. “She died a year ago when we were eleven. She went out alone in the desert to try to make a plan to change the pack. I think she kind of knew it wouldn’t work no matter what she came up with and I think that she just wanted to be alone. She...she asked me to come with her, but I knew that if one of the dingoes caught her plotting against the pack, she would be in serious trouble and they would

exile her. We had talked about changing things together in secret, but if she was actually going to plan seriously, she could have gotten in huge trouble.”

His voice cracked with sorrow. “I thought if I didn’t go, she wouldn’t either, so I said no, it wouldn’t work. She said she knew it probably wouldn’t and that she just wanted to be alone for a while. She said it was okay if I didn’t want to come and that she wasn’t mad at me for saying no. But she did leave. I thought that she wouldn’t really plan anything after she said she just wanted to be alone, so I thought that if I just left her alone for a while, she would be happier tomorrow. I tried to go to sleep that night, but after a few hours had passed, I decided to go out and find her.”

He trailed off and stared hollowly at the wall. “I found her dead. I... I tried to see what killed her and there was a wound on her throat and scars all over her body, but I...I didn’t know what happened and I didn’t know what to think and...” He shook his head fiercely and let out a low, shaky breath. “It doesn’t matter. Bone found me standing out there after a few hours passed and we brought her back to camp. I actually thought he cared just a bit when we held a funeral for her, but it was all just an act.” He curled his lip in disgust. “I actually let him come with me later to bury her.”

He closed his eyes as if to block out the memories before slowly opening them again, their light brown depths colorless and unfocused. “The pack decided that outcasts killed her just before they held the funeral,” he murmured. “I always doubted that that’s what happened, but I didn’t really know the truth back then. Now I do.”

“What’s the truth?” Saderia whispered.

Dingo stared darkly at the pink ribbon. “Bone killed her.”

Her eyes stretched wide with shock. “What?”

Dingo shook his head. “I started to suspect it when he tried to kill me just a few weeks ago. He accused me of ‘knowing things’, incriminating things about him that he thought Claw had known. He said I was just an annoying problem to get rid of... ‘just like my sister’.” His tail flicked violently across the ground as a growl rumbled in his throat. “He came to my den just a few minutes before I was exiled and he told me that he killed her and that he was glad he killed her.”

A shiver of horror raced down Saderia’s spine when she read the dullness and sorrow in Dingo’s distant brown eyes. “That’s...horrible” she

whispered. "I'm so sorry, Dingo." She squeezed her eyes shut, unable to imagine what that might feel like. Looking back on her own life, she distinctly remembered the sorrow and bitterness that seemed to dictate her life when she had thought her parents were dead. To know that someone she had loved had been killed by a member of her own family seemed unbearable.

"Nothing happened to Bone?" Dash demanded. "He wasn't punished or anything?"

Dingo let out a humorless laugh. "Why would he be? He became Second in Command just a few weeks before he killed Claw. He was and still is the second most powerful dingo in the pack. Even if the other dingoes knew he killed Claw, they wouldn't really care. The Leader would find some way to cover it up, anyway, or Bone would have found some other way to get away with it. Dingoes with power get away with everything."

Saderia winced with sympathy and looked down, trying not to read the sorrow in her rescuer's eyes. When she dared to look up, she longed to reach out to him to say something, but she remembered all too well how Dingo had pushed her away before. Seeing the dull, haunted look in his eyes, she could see why.

"Dingo..." she began.

"He said he made her suffer before she died," he murmured, staring lifelessly at something she couldn't see. "He taunted me about her death with Rip and Tear for a year after we buried her. They always said things like, 'Where's your protection now, Dingo?' They said she hated me and that I dragged her down. They said it was my fault she was killed. They said Claw was glad to be dead because it meant she was away from me."

A shudder of disgust coursed through Saderia's body. Her heart ached with pain for her new friend and she longed to say something, but she didn't know what to say.

Dingo let out a low, humorless chuckle. "I don't know why I'm telling you any of this," he said, smiling lifelessly at the wall in a way that made it seem like a grimace. "You shouldn't mean anything to me." He glanced at Saderia out of the corner of his eye. "But for some reason, I felt like I had to save you. You...you remind me of Claw."

Saderia's eyes widened in surprise as she stared at Dingo. If she really did remind him of his sister, that at least explained why he had saved them, but what did that mean? Was she really like Claw?

Dingo sighed and silently shook himself, a tiny bit of color returning to his pale face. He turned around to glance at them and managed a weak smile. "We've been sitting here too long. You said you've been out in the desert for almost three weeks and you haven't found any sign to lead you to your family, right?" When they nodded, he continued, "Well, if you want, you can stay here with me. That way, you won't get lost, you won't starve, and you won't have to worry about running into Bone or the Snake Pit. I know the desert by heart and if you stay here, I'll go out to look for your family while you're here...Would that be okay with you?"

Saderia's eyes widened with hope. "You would really do that?"

Dingo shrugged. "I don't see why not. I can't just throw you out into the desert."

"Th-thank you so much," she stammered, exchanging a quick glance with Dash. "Dash and I would love to stay here."

Dingo smiled. "Good." He gestured around at the den. "This is now your home, at least for the time being." Glancing at the rock covering the entrance to the den, he added, "I'll go out looking right now and I'll keep my eyes open for any tigers. Do you have any idea if there might be someone looking for you?"

"My Dad might be searching for us," Saderia replied, feeling her heart beat faster with hope and excitement. "His name's Makero and he has bright green eyes."

"I'll keep my eyes open for any sign of him," Dingo promised. "I'll do everything I can to find your father." He smiled and Saderia's heart seemed to burst with hope and gratitude. "In the meantime, why don't you go get comfortable and try to relax? You've had a rough couple of weeks and I think it's time you deserved a rest."

# Chapter Twenty-Two

## The Journal

Saderia's eyes gleamed in the dim light as she stared at the silent den around her, her tail twitching lightly back and forth across the smooth, sandy stone. Her gaze flicked restlessly to Dash and a smile tugged at her lips when she saw him laying close beside her, his tail draped over hers. A soft sigh of relief breathed out of her chest when she studied him and realized his scars had finally begun to heal. Her sleepless gaze slowly fell over the dark, quiet den around her and she felt a weak smile light up her face.

After three days in Dingo's den, she had just about gotten used to her surroundings. Her eyes flicked toward the hollowed rocks on the side of the wall where the water was completely still. Unconsciously licking her lips, Saderia realized how grateful she was that Dingo was giving them his water. After days of living off of nothing but cactus juice, the warm water was almost a miracle. Now that she had a steady supply of the liquid, her throat no longer ached with dryness and scratchiness.

Thinking back to the first day of her stay in Dingo's den, she remembered how she and Dash had waited beside the rocks for Dingo to return from searching for their father. When he had come back to the den, he had brought with him prey for him to eat and just shrugged it off when Saderia had seemed surprised. He had allowed them to drink most of his water while he lived off of the prey. He seemed grateful to have anything to eat at all.

Glancing down at her sleeping canine companion, Saderia felt a tiny tingle of sadness. Over the past three days, Dingo had been doing everything he could to search for their father, leaving them alone in the den for hours upon hours. Even though he was helping them, he hardly said a word to them other than to report what he had found—or hadn't found. Whenever they tried to talk to him, his only response had been curt and standoffish. Somehow he managed to avoid them even within his own den.

Remembering something she had picked up with her Dream sense just after she, Dash, and Dingo had finished telling each other their stories, she let out a sigh. As she stared down at her rescuer, she wondered if that was all he would ever be to her: just a savior and not a friend. He didn't seem willing to get to know them any further or even talk to them. Thinking about the feelings she had sensed with her Dream sense the first time she had come to his den, she realized he didn't seem to think he deserved to get to know them or make friends with them.

Letting out a long sigh, she continued to stare at the scruffy brown dingo, her amber eyes troubled. After what felt like ages, she finally felt the need to whisper, "Dingo?"

Dingo cracked an eyelid and glanced at her. "Hmm?"

She blinked in surprise. "You're awake?"

"Looks like it."

Saderia sighed and looked away. "Can I tell you something?"

Dingo lifted his head to look at her, his light brown eyes tired and distant. "What is it?"

Saderia hesitated. "Well, I hope this doesn't upset you, but...Dingo, you're not bad-tempered."

He blinked several times before narrowing his eyes. "I didn't think you were a liar, Saderia."

"You have a right to be," she amended. "I can understand how lonely you must be. I mean, the pack has done so many horrible things to you for twelve years."

Dingo sighed. "Yeah, and I guess they broke me a while ago. Good for them."

"Dingo, you don't understand. When I first met Dash, he would have just as soon clawed my ears off as look at me. He avoided me like a disease and whenever I tried to talk to him about his past and the way the others treated him, he got defensive and growled at me, but I still cared about him. Look how close we are now."

Dingo was silent.

"His situation wasn't exactly like yours," she went on, "but he still tried to avoid me and the other animals. Even though he was a bit short-tempered back then, I still wanted to be his friend. My Dream sense told me that he was a good animal and even if I didn't have special senses, that



wouldn't have been too hard to figure out. I know you're a good animal, too, and I want to be your friend."

Dingo turned away. "I don't want to hear this."

"Dingo..."

"The last *friend* I had died," he growled. He whirled around to face her with blazing eyes. "Actually, every *friend* I had died, if you can count some of them as friends. So unless you want to die, I suggest you keep your distance."

"Can't you just try to become friends with us? It can't hurt."

Dingo's eyes darkened. "Yes, it can."

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "We're not going to die. We've managed to survive three weeks out here, haven't we?"

"Congratulations," he growled. "Claw survived for eleven years and then one night, she was dead. Just like that. Really shows how much those eleven years meant."

Saderia sighed. "Either way, it's not your job to take care of us. You can't just stay this way forever."

"Yes, I can," he growled resolutely, glancing away from her. "I'm probably going to die soon, anyway, so it doesn't matter."

Saderia blinked. "What?"

Dingo sighed. "Never mind." He slowly turned to glance at her with dark, defeated brown eyes. "Why do you even want to be my friend, Saderia? You already seem to know everything, so I'm sure you know how useless I am."

"But you saved us!" she protested. "You pulled us out of the Snake Pit! You even said yourself that no one's ever survived the Snake Pit and the reason we did is because you helped us! Without you, we would have been eaten alive!" She shook her head. "You saved us from the dingoes over and over again and later you raced into the dingo camp and saved us from that flood."

Dingo glanced down. "You don't know the whole story. Or maybe you do, considering you seem to know *everything*."

"What's the whole story?" she challenged.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I almost let Bone and his minions kill you the first time. I was almost too late to help you out of the Snake Pit because I couldn't get past the dingoes who were guarding it."

And if it hadn't flooded, I wouldn't have run in there." He turned to face her with shadowed brown eyes. "I would have left you to die."

Saderia's ears drooped. "Dingo, there were hundreds of them in that camp. If you had run in there, you would have been killed, too. It doesn't have anything to do with anything other than self-preservation."

Dingo rolled his eyes and glanced away. "I would have died sooner or later, anyway. At least if I had run in there I might have been able to save you first."

"You didn't have to save us," Saderia emphasized. "It wasn't your job to save us. The fact that you even bothered says enough. You didn't have to risk your life for us."

"Yeah, well, I didn't have to watch you suffer either," he growled, his eyes flashing in the darkness. "It's bad enough that's all I ever did for my sister when she was alive. Bone was right." He shook his head. "I deserve to die."

Saderia narrowed her eyes. "It isn't true and you can't let him get to you that way, Dingo. Bone isn't right and you aren't wrong. Why listen to him at all? I'm sure Claw would have wanted you to move on with your life and not let this drag you down."

There was a pause. "I should have guessed you would know about that," Dingo muttered after a long silence.

Saderia frowned. "Know about what?"

"The promise."

Saderia slowly shook her head. "I don't know anything about that."

"Shocking," Dingo muttered with a roll of his eyes. He sighed. "But you're right about what Claw would want. Right before she went out in the desert and...died, she made me promise not to give up." A low growl rumbled in his throat. "But I only made that promise because I didn't know she was going to die and I didn't know my own brother was going to kill her."

"I understand," she whispered. "I...I know you were kind of hoping that *I* was like your sister so that you could have someone to be friends with again, but I'm not just like her. If I had known Claw, I know I would have admired her, but I can't be her. And you knew that from the start and still helped us so that you could save us, we could be friends, and you could start over. Just because I know about Claw doesn't mean that any chance of

a good friendship has been erased. True friends aren't animals who like you without knowing a thing about you or your past; good friends are animals who like you more *because* of it."

Dingo sighed. "Pretty words, tiger."

"It's true," she insisted. "Dash and I are actually closer now that I know who his father is and what his past was like. I appreciate you more now that I know about Claw and about what you've been through. You can make a clean start, Dingo, but you can't erase the past. You shouldn't want to when you know you're moving forward. Claw might be gone, but that's not your fault. From what I can tell, you did everything you could to watch out for her, but there's only so much you *can* do. Now that Dash and I know about your past, we don't look down on you or hate you for it. We feel more connected to you."

There was a long pause. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised..." Dingo finally murmured, "but how did you know how I felt when I left this den three days ago after you mentioned Claw?"

Saderia hesitated. "My Dream sense sometimes lets me see what other animals are thinking. It's rare and I don't really mean to do it."

There was another silence. "Claw used to be able to read my mind like that," he muttered. "She didn't have weird powers; we were just close."

Saderia hung her head. "I'm sorry. But you can't keep blaming yourself for what happened to her."

Her head jerked up when Dingo suddenly swung around to face her, his claws scraping roughly against the sandy ground and his brown eyes blazing with fury. "Easy for you to say," he snarled. "You're not the one with your own sister's blood on your paws!"

"And neither are you," she replied steadily.

Dingo shook his head frantically, squeezing his eyes shut and turning away from her. "You don't understand," he growled. He trembled violently as he stormed over to the hollowed rocks then whirled around and started to pace distressfully back and forth. His eyes opened wide, their light brown depths wild and haunted. Heavy pants seemed to shudder out of his chest and deep shivers raced through his body as sweat streaked through his fur. "It was my fault she died! I ruined her life before she died! She probably hated me! You don't understand any of that! You could never understand any of that!"

Saderia's eyes widened in shock as she stared at his wild, shaking form. Her mouth gaped open in astonishment and confusion as he stopped in the middle of the den, his eyes distant and bloodshot as if he couldn't even see her or the den around her and was instead staring into some other awful world. How had he so suddenly been overcome by such desolation? It was almost as if this response had been programmed into him, but how...?

Her eyes widened and then narrowed when she slowly began to understand. "That's Bone talking," she told him. "Not you, Dingo."

Dingo whirled around to face her with wide, scared eyes, his terrified gaze locking on hers and never leaving, as if begging her for help. She wondered how many times he had looked at his brothers that way.

"You're right about one thing," she murmured. "I don't understand. I don't understand why you let Bone make you believe this—that this is somehow your fault—when *he's* the one who killed Claw."

Dingo's eyes widened in distress. "But I..."

"Bone's trying to make you believe these things so that you'll break and he can get to you. So that he can take the spotlight off of himself and so that you won't try to stand up for yourself. So that he can get away with what he did. He's just playing a sick game with your mind. And you're letting him win even if you're not aware of it, Dingo. You're believing everything he says and it's ruining your life. You're letting him destroy the good memories you have of Claw because you think you hurt her when that's a lie. You're letting him make you believe things about her that aren't true! And it's hurting you. You're letting him win."

Dingo's eyes widened in the darkness of the den. "I..." he stammered. "I-I don't..." He broke off and stared into her eyes, never once blinking or looking away. "Maybe...you're right..."

Saderia opened her mouth to reply, but before she could say anything, she was interrupted by a soft, feathery voice that seemed to echo through the den.

"Thank you."

Glancing back at Dash and turning back to Dingo, Saderia's eyes widened in surprise and confusion when she realized the voice had come from nowhere...just like the voice she had heard in the desert when she and Dash had first gotten lost. Blinking rapidly, she tried to shake off an eerie feeling when she realized there was still something she didn't understand.

Ignoring the strange voice, she glanced up at Dingo and winced when she read the pain and fear in his wide brown eyes.

“Why can’t I think straight anymore?” he whispered. “I thought I had everything under control. I was supposed to have everything under control!” He let out a growl and glared down at the sand below them. “Why is this so confusing? I’m such an idiot! Why doesn’t this make *sense* anymore?”

Saderia let out a sad sigh. “You’re not an idiot. Anyone can be fooled by someone like that. Bone told you those things over and over again and even though you probably didn’t realize it, you started to believe it. He wanted you to think you had everything under control and not realize he was getting to you. His plan, on the surface, was just to bring you down, but it actually goes much deeper than that. He not only wanted to destroy you on the outside, but he wanted to destroy you on the inside, as well, to ruin your memories of Claw and even change them, to make you hate yourself so much you couldn’t even *trust* yourself anymore. That’s why he was constantly telling you those things about Claw and how you ‘caused’ her to be killed. After hearing something so many times, you couldn’t help but start to believe it.”

She sighed. “None of the pack could see who you really were because they all believed Bone. He’s manipulating them, too. He turned them against you just because you’re different and got them to believe you were wrong so that he could stay in charge. Listen, Dingo, Dash and I aren’t part of the pack and we don’t believe their lies. When Bone pushed us into the Snake Pit, he tried to make us believe that what *he* was doing was your fault because he was doing it *just* to hurt you, but I didn’t buy it and not just because you saved us.”

Dingo stared at her for a long time before looking down. “Maybe you’re right.” He let out a long, shaky breath. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I know I haven’t been the friendliest dingo so far.”

Saderia smiled. “It’s okay. We can still be friends and we can all look after each other.” Dingo’s eyes flashed to hers as she said it; she wondered if Claw had ever said something similar. “Do you want to go back to sleep now?”

Dingo sighed and carelessly collapsed onto the ground, laying flat on his belly with his legs splayed out on either side and his muzzle resting

on the sand. "I don't think I can sleep," he admitted. "It's not like that's anything new, but..." He trailed off with a weak shake of his head.

Saderia slowly crept down from the smooth stone and laid down beside him, her white belly brushing against the sand. "Do you want to talk then?" she asked. "About Claw? I know it hurts to think about her, but it might make you feel better afterwards."

"I guess," he murmured, lost in thought. "What do you want to know?"

"Well, for starters, what did she look like?"

Dingo sighed wistfully. "She had light brown fur that was almost as long as mine and light brown eyes. She was kind of skinny, but not gaunt like I am and she always wore a light pink ribbon around her neck." His eyes flicked to the dark corner of the wall and he gestured with his paw to the small brown book and the worn pink ribbon laying propped up against the wall. "Those were hers. She used to write in the journal every now and then and she loved that ribbon. I kept them after she died and brought them with me when I was exiled. It...it probably sounds weird to keep stuff like that when she's dead, but...they're my last connections to her."

"I don't think it's weird at all," Saderia replied, thinking of how she had cherished her mother's diary when she had thought her parents were dead. "I know how important things like that can be." She frowned. "But where did she get a journal and a ribbon in the desert?"

"She found them in some old, abandoned human camp we found when we were pups. She decided to take them with her and she used the book to teach herself how to write. She taught me later so that we would be the only ones in the pack who would know how to read and write in it."

Saderia nodded. "That's interesting. What did she write about?"

Dingo hesitated. "I guess she just wrote about the things that happened to her. I...I haven't read a lot of it. I'm kind of afraid to, actually. It might tell me...things I don't want to know. Like what Bone was talking about. He said I might 'know things', incriminating things that Claw knew. He said that...that's why he killed her. Because she knew things..."

"Oh," Saderia murmured, looking down. After a long moment, she cautiously looked back up and turned to glance at the book. "I guess that would be hard, but...if you don't mind we could read it together." She

turned to him with a weak smile. “We can help you look through it and figure out what to do.”

Dingo hesitated for a long time, his eyes narrowed and trained on the light brown journal. After several long moments, he finally turned to face her and managed a weak smile. “I might like that.” He yawned and rested his head against the ground, his eyes slipping shut. “I guess we should sleep. Goodnight, Saderia.”

She smiled and curled up next to him, letting her eyes slip shut in the darkness of the night. “Goodnight, Dingo.” She curled her tail up around her nose, smiling when she felt Dingo hesitantly put his paw over hers. As she slowly drifted into unconsciousness, she was unaware of Dingo glancing down at her, his eyes wide with surprise and gratitude as he thought about what she said.

Saderia’s tail flicked restlessly back and forth as she stared at the tiny brown journal. Her amber eyes locked on a tiny word scratched across the top: Claw. Her heart skipped with wonder when she thought about what she might read in there and what kind of life Claw had had. The desert seemed like such a terrible place, but had Claw’s life been bad before she died or had it been somewhat decent? She cast a glance back at the rocky slate covering the entrance, wondering when Dingo was going to be back from hunting and looking for their father. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was taking so long on purpose to avoid looking in his sister’s journal.

Beside her, Dash looked up over her shoulder to follow her gaze. When she turned back around with a sigh, he met her gaze with a slight smile. “You know he always stays out for a long time.” Saderia sighed. “I guess. I suppose I’m just anxious to know more about Claw. I mean, if Dingo thinks I’m like her, I at least want to know in what way.”

Dash rolled his eyes. “Just be patient. He’ll get here soon.”

Saderia glanced down. “I hope so.”

Dash flicked her gently with his tail and smiled. “What else did you talk about last night besides Claw and the journal?”

Saderia shrugged. “Just about some of the stuff that was bothering him, like Bone and the others dingoes.” She sighed and glanced around at the den, a slight smile tugging at her lips. “I kind of like it here. It’s nice to

have a new friend and I can still hardly believe how many times Dingo saved us.”

“Yeah,” Dash murmured, looking around. He paused and turned back to her, his amber eyes knowing. “You think Dingo’s part of the prophecy, don’t you?”

Frowning and swatting him playfully with her tail, she snapped, “I can never keep anything from you!”

Dash grinned. “I guess we’re even then. But really, do you think he is?”

Saderia nodded, giving him a tight smile. “It kind of seems that way. I get this feeling about him that’s kind of like the feeling I got about you when we became friends and I started to realize you were part of the prophecy. With all the times that he’s saved us and the fact that my Dream sense seemed to pull us toward him, I think it’s likely he is a part of it.”

Dash shrugged. “That’s good, I guess. We should probably hold off on telling him, though. He’s had enough surprises for now.”

Saderia grinned. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” She paused and whirled around when she heard the sound of rock scraping across rock. A smile spread across her face when she saw Dingo heave aside the slate blocking the entrance of the den and step delicately inside, his tail dragging against the ground. Noticing the dark bags under his eyes as he pushed the slate back over the gaping hole of the den, her smile wavered. She hoped he hadn’t stayed up too long last night.

“Didn’t you, er, catch anything?” she asked, noticing his lack of prey.

Dingo shook his head and padded over to them, a soft sigh escaping his throat. “No, I couldn’t find any food. It’s okay, though. I’m not starving and it’s not worth risking my life to try to look for food around the dingo camp. I’m not that desperate yet.” Walking closer, he carefully sat down in front of them, his expression guarded as he looked them over. “So…have you two been talking about…Claw’s journal?”

Saderia nodded. “Do you still want to read it?”

He flicked his tail with faked casualness and shrugged uneasily. “If you want.” After a slight hesitation, he slowly reached forward and dragged the book toward him then carefully opened it to the first page. He eyed the



page nervously as Saderia and Dash crowded around it, staring at the small dark letters dotting the yellowed paper.

“Can you read it?” Dingo asked, glancing over at Saderia with cautious light brown eyes.

Frowning and studying the markings scribbled across the page, Saderia felt her eyes widen in surprise when she realized she could actually make out familiar words and letters. Remembering that Claw had originally found the journal in a human camp and taught herself to write using human script, Saderia had expected the writing to be completely foreign to her. To her surprise, she could clearly decipher each and every word.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice betraying her surprise; she had expected human writing to be much different.

“Do you want to read it out loud?” Dingo asked.

Saderia looked up at him cautiously. “Are you sure?”

Dingo nodded. “Yes, go ahead.”

Taking a deep breath, Saderia slowly looked down at the page and scanned the words carefully with her curious amber gaze. After a brief hesitation, she opened her mouth and quietly began to read.

*Today was awful. I expected it to be really fun, but after what my father did, everything's ruined! Today was the day my brothers and I were supposed to be named in front of the pack since we finally got to be four weeks old. Everything was supposed to be great, but of course our dad had to mess it up. I can't believe he leads the pack when he's such a jerk.*

*It all started out fine. All of the dingoes gathered around the water trough when Dagger stepped forward and announced a meeting for the pack. He stood in front of the water trough and asked all the pups who were going to be named to wait by the farthest edge of the water trough to wait to be called forward. His Second in Command stood somewhere off beside him to oversee the whole thing—his name is Fang, he's fifteen, and he's really nice, but also really weird. Anyway, my brothers and I waited on the sidelines while the other two pups in the pack got their names. One of them was my friend, Rain, Fang's little sister, and the other was my oldest brother Bone's friend named Rock.*

*My oldest brother, Bone, got his name first and then Rip and Tear, my other older brothers, and finally my father called me forward and*

*named me Claw. But once he called my other brother, Dingo, forward, he gave him this really mean glare and started yelling at him. It had something to do about him not fighting like the other pups and about him acting 'different' or something, but it all ended with Dagger calling him a failure in front of the whole pack! He said he was going to name him Dingo because he didn't deserve a name. I was furious!*

*Now the entire pack seems to give Dingo dirty looks every time he walks past. I don't know what their problem is. Just because Dagger said something, they all suddenly hate my brother? What exactly is different anyway? I guess it doesn't matter. Bone and Rock have been snickering about it the whole time, but they're idiots, so we usually just ignore them. I just hope this whole thing blows over soon.*

Dingo let out a long sigh as Saderia looked up from the page. "That was when we were pups," he explained. "The Leader holds a meeting in front of the whole pack and gives all the new pups names when they get old enough."

Dash frowned and looked up at him. "Don't their parents do that?"

Dingo narrowed his eyes in confusion. "No. Why would they?"

Saderia glanced up at him in shock. "Your Dad really called you out like that in front of everyone when you were just a pup?"

Dingo shrugged. "Yep. I think that was when they all started to hate me." He sighed. "Either way, it doesn't matter. They would have hated me no matter what."

Looking down with an uneasy gaze, Saderia stared curiously at the page. "So Claw had a friend named Rain when she was a pup? Did they stay friends?"

Dingo let out a weary breath. "Yes, they stayed friends all her life."

"Did Rain..."

"She didn't survive."

Saderia looked down. "Oh." She took a deep breath and slowly let it out, trying to shake off a tingle of sadness. Glancing back down at the page, she suddenly frowned. "There's something else I was wondering about."

Dingo glanced over at her. "What's that?"

Looking up at him, she asked, "Bone's twelve, the same age as you, right? And it says here that that dingo named Fang was fifteen when he was

Second in Command. Do the dingoes really pick their Leaders and Second in Commands that young?”

“Of course.” He looked surprised at her question. “Dingoes are expected to mature fast. It’s the way it goes in the pack.”

“That’s kind of sad,” Dash murmured as he glanced down at the page.

Dingo just shrugged. “I guess it’s different in your forest, but it’s usually pretty normal in the pack. Dingoes are usually old enough to become Leader or Second in Command when they’re about ten or eleven years old.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Keep reading.”

Nodding, Saderia carefully turned the frayed, yellowy page and let her gaze settle on the faded marks below her. Clearing her throat, she cautiously began to read.

*Today I learned what outcasts are—the hard way. I had heard some of the other dingoes like Dagger talking about them every now and then, but I never really knew much about them or what they were. I found some of them and learned what they were just a few hours ago when I went out into the desert with Fang and Rain.*

*Dagger had ordered Fang to take me with him when he taught his sister how to hunt. I didn’t really like the idea at first, but I decided to go along with it. After we left, Fang started to teach us how to hunt, but when he tried to show Rain how to do something, I wandered off a bit to look around. I tried to go back to Fang and Rain, but before I could find my way back to them, I was attacked by these really dirty and gross looking dingoes! I tried to run, but they chased me right back to where Fang was waiting. He tried to fight them off, but there were three of them and they were starting to beat him.*

*Rain and I were really scared, but right before the outcasts could really hurt Fang, these other outcasts showed up. I thought they were going to attack, at first, but when they saw us, they attacked the outcasts that were trying to hurt us! They started to drive the evil ones away, but before they could get them to leave, Dagger suddenly showed up. He immediately started clawing at all the outcasts and killed one of the ones that helped us even after Fang told him he was on our side!*

*I was really upset after Dagger left and Fang led us away from the battle scene. I didn't know what to think. Fang took Rain back to his den at the back of the camp and then just sat outside, looking up at the stars. I tried to talk to him and he told me that the outcast in that fight shouldn't have been killed—just like I thought! He also told me not to tell anyone he said that because none of the other dingoes believed that. I tried to ask him how they couldn't believe he shouldn't have died when he helped us, but he didn't answer. All he told me was to keep my thoughts to myself and not let anyone know I thought that that outcast shouldn't have been killed. He said Dagger wouldn't be happy about it if I accidentally told someone. I don't know why, though.*

*I'm starting to think something is really wrong here. Why does Fang want to hide what he thinks from the other dingoes? Maybe I should ask Dingo. He might know.*

“Claw was ‘different’, but she wasn’t born that way,” Dingo muttered. “That must have been when she started to see things differently and realize there was something wrong with the pack.” Glancing over at Saderia and Dash’s mystified faces, he went on, “I suppose I should explain some things, like Fang. He was different, too.”

Saderia glanced up at him. “Even though he was Second in Command? I thought the pack hated different dingoes.”

“Well, they do,” Dingo explained, “but if you asked any dingo in the pack whether Fang was ‘different’, they would call you insane. Fang fought, lied, and did everything else to make sure no one realized he was different, or so Claw told me. What he did kind of defeats the purpose of being that way, but I suppose he had no choice, considering his life would be at stake if anyone found out the truth. I never realized he was different until Claw told me; she ended up getting pretty attached to Fang and he usually only shared his real thoughts with her.”

“Wow,” Saderia murmured. “Should I keep reading?”

Dingo nodded. “Yeah, you might as well.”

Giving him a weak, reassuring smile, Saderia glanced back down at the book and carefully began reading over the next few short entries. The next few pages seemed to skip around a lot until she finally came to a page

Dingo guessed had been written around the time he and Claw were four years old.

*My brothers are hunched around me as I write this. Of course, they're all giving me curious looks, but I find it best to just ignore everyone except Dingo. All of them are soaking wet and shivering after experiencing the first flood we've ever seen.*

*We've all heard about storms and floods since the time we were born, but we've never actually seen one. My mother, Sand, usually pulled us inside whenever there was a sign of one coming. We would hear strange booming and pattering sounds outside, but we never really got to see what happened in a storm. Now I kind of wish we had stayed ignorant.*

*Dingo, Rain, and I all went out to roam around the desert earlier today at the same time Bone, Rip, Tear, and Rock left to go hunt. After a while, Dingo and Rain started to notice something weird about the sky; it got dark way too early. I decided to go back to camp just in case something bad happened. It started to rain just an hour or two before we got into camp and even though we only got to see the beginning of it, we've definitely seen enough. Considering how small we all are, I'm just glad none of us have drowned.*

*Thankfully, Dingo, Rain, and I made it to Sand's den at the same time Bone, Rock, Rip, and Tear got back to camp. Sand pulled us inside and pulled that rocky slate over the entrance to block out the water and then told us we could relax since we were safe. She's spent the next couple of minutes muttering about how angry Dagger will be that a flood came because it will keep us from moving the pack to the other camp when he wanted to. I found it best to ignore her because I don't particularly care what angers Dagger. I guess I had better get some sleep because I'm exhausted after escaping that flood. I just hope tomorrow is sunnier.*

"So it floods often," Saderia murmured, shivering at her own memories of the awful gritty water and the blinding torrent of rain.

Dingo nodded. "Yeah, Claw and I got stuck in the middle of a lot of them over the years. We always made it." He sighed. "This part is okay. Some of it hurts to remember, but it's not the kind of things I was afraid of finding, the things Bone was talking about." Glancing down at their curious

faces, he added, “Anyway, I suppose I should explain some things. See the slate covering the entrance of my den? That’s not just used to hide me from the pack. All the dingoes have them to push over the entrances of their dens whenever there’s a flood to keep the water from seeping in. As for the other camp Claw mentioned, that’s easy to explain. The pack has two camps that it migrates back and forth between. They switch camps every couple of months or so to track prey when it flees from one end of the desert to the other.”

Saderia nodded as something clicked into place. “That’s why that one camp was abandoned when Dash and I first found it...and, uh, not so abandoned the next time we stumbled onto it.”

“Yeah, I guess I should have found some way to warn you.” Dingo sighed. “Oh well. I guess it doesn’t matter as long as you survived.”

Saderia smiled. “That’s the spirit. Do you want me to keep reading?”

Dingo shrugged. “Yeah, go ahead. This really brings back memories.”

Saderia gave him a tight, reassuring smile and flicked her tail comfortingly over his shoulders. Turning back to the book, she began reading over the next few pages that gave brief descriptions of some of the ordinary events in Claw’s life. After reading over a few anxious, frenetic pages, she finally found herself staring at a long, troubled entry scrawled chaotically across the page.

*I am very confused. Am I different? The whole pack seems to hate different dingoes—that’s why they hate Dingo. He’s different and I think Fang is, too, but he hides it from the pack. Different dingoes think the pack’s way of life is horrible and I’m starting to think that way. Does that make me different? I didn’t think those outcasts that died so long ago should have been killed because they helped us and I think they saw the truth about how bad the pack is. I don’t think they should be starved and hunted down in the first place, actually. Some outcasts are cruel, like those ones that attacked me, but most of them are actually nice and only fight to defend themselves. Fang told me that most of the outcasts were exiled for rebellion, which means they must have been different, too—and they were hated and exiled for that.*

*It's not just what I think about outcasts that makes me think I might be different. I don't think dingoes with power, like Dagger, should be able to get away with anything. Fang told me it's 'highly likely' that he killed dingoes at some point and yet he's still Leader. That can't be right and yet everyone seems to accept it and hate any dingoes that don't.*

*I think I'd rather be kind and different, than cruel and 'normal.' I don't think I want to be a dingo who doesn't have a mind of their own and listens to Dagger and does everything he says without question. But what if the other dingoes find out? What if they already know I'm 'different'? I'm starting to get kind of nervous...*

*I don't want to conform to a society that's cruel enough to hate a pup just because he acts differently and I guess that makes me different. But I know I'm going to hide it like Fang does. I'm smart enough to know that being different is dangerous and if I have any chance of surviving in the pack, it would be best to hide it. Fang told me a long time ago that if I showed any indication of being different, Dagger might actually exile me.*

*I don't know what's going to happen and sometimes I don't particularly want to know either. The only thing I can do is hope things work out in the end.*

# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Claw

Warm water splashed onto her tongue as Saderia lapped up a few quick drops from the small hollowed out rocks. She glanced up at the sound of splashing noises beside her and smiled when Dash looked up at her, his dark brown chin wet with tiny beads of water. Her ears pricked up and she turned at the sound of a long, soft yawn from behind her. Smiling, she watched as Dingo drowsily stumbled toward them and leaned down to lap up a few sips of water.

“Do you want to read some more of Claw’s journal?” she asked when Dingo turned to look up at them.

Shrugging, Dingo nodded and padded over to the small brown book before sliding it over to them and opening it to the page they had left off on. Saderia and Dash padded toward him to glance over his shoulder, but when Saderia drew closer, she could read the sudden shock and fear in Dingo’s light brown gaze. Seeing her look, he abruptly looked up and shut the book. When they looked up at him in surprise, he carefully avoided their gazes and slid the book back into place before rapidly turning to walk away from them.

“We’ll read more later,” he growled, ignoring their stunned stares. “I’m going out to hunt and look for your father.”

Saderia blinked in shock. “But...weren’t we just going to read?”

“We’ll do it later,” he muttered, flicking his tail.

Ignoring their stunned, confused expressions, he padded toward the slate blocking the entrance and threw it aside. Saderia and Dash watched with wide, puzzled eyes as he dragged it shut behind him and disappeared behind a wall of rock, leaving them alone in silence.

Saderia’s ears drooped with sadness. In the three days that had passed since they had first opened Claw’s journal, Dingo had seemed to act much friendlier toward them. It was easy to see that he was starting to trust them more, but after what had just happened, Saderia could tell that he still



had a long way to go before he could truly begin to have faith in their friendship.

Glancing down at the journal, Saderia felt a tingle of apprehension and wonder. What had Dingo seen in the journal that had bothered him so much? Over the past three days, she had read several short entries about the common events in Claw's life. She remembered shivering at her descriptions of the many floods over the years as well as the other disasters that tormented the desert. She also remembering wincing when she read some of the more angry, messy entries about something the pack did. When she read the journal, she would occasionally glance over at Dingo and see a tinge of pain in his narrowed brown gaze, but he had never seemed too bothered by the memories held inside the journal. Thinking about what he had told them about Bone and what his oldest brother had accused him of, Saderia realized he must still be afraid to find out what he had meant by 'knowing things'. The next entry in the journal must have carried some sort of hint that he wasn't ready to have.

"That was weird," Dash murmured, bringing her out of her thoughts. He narrowed his eyes and stared intently at the entrance then turned to face her. "What do you think made him leave like that?" She shrugged. "I guess there's something in that journal that he doesn't want to know about yet. He just needs time to prepare himself for it."

"I guess." He let out a sigh and sat back, giving her a tight smile. "I guess we're going to be on our own for a few hours."

Saderia nodded and sat back to face him, as well. "We should probably be used to it now. How long have we been out in this desert?"

"A month," Dash replied, his amber eyes dark and serious as he met her stunned gaze. "Four weeks, four days."

Saderia's heart skipped a beat. "We've really been out here for a whole *month*?" When Dash nodded grimly, she looked down at her paws, her mind blank with surprise. "Wow," she murmured. "I...I wonder what Mom and Dad are doing now. I mean, after a month, do you think they'll still be looking for us?"

"I think Karenisha and Makero would still be looking for us even if years had passed by. They might have found a new home for the forest animals by now, but even if they have, I'm sure one of them is still out there looking for us."

Saderia sighed. "You're probably right. I'm almost certain Dad's out there looking for us. I hope Dingo finds him soon or else we might be stuck here forever." She shivered at the thought.

Dash looked away. "I'm sure he'll find him eventually. He has a better chance of finding him, after all, since he knows the desert. If it was just us looking for him, we would probably be going around in circles, even with your Dream sense."

Saderia rolled her eyes. "I guess you're right." She paused then added, "If Dingo does find Dad, what do you think we should do then? I mean, we'll obviously go to live in our new home with them if they've found it, but what about Dingo? We can't just leave him out here when everybody's trying to hunt him down." She hesitated. "Do you think we should take him with us to come live with us in a new forest?"

Dash frowned. "I don't know if he would want to. I mean, things are obviously bad for him out here, but I don't know if he would be happy to just pack up and go live in a forest." He paused. "I guess we could do it, though. It might take some explaining to get the forest animals to relax and accept him there, but I'm sure that after a while we could convince everyone to welcome him."

"I'm sure everyone would get used to it over time," Saderia agreed. Even as she tried to smile and seem optimistic, she couldn't help but glance at the entrance of the den and wonder if Dingo would ever agree to staying in the forest with them.

A long silence spread out between them as they stared at the slate covering the entrance and glanced over at the journal laying just a few inches away. After a long hesitation, Dash finally glanced over at her and murmured, "Saderia, can I ask you something?"

Saderia turned to him. "What is it?"

He paused. "Well, remember when we first got lost? You tried to use your Dream sense to lead us back to Makero and the rest of the group...but we never found them. We found Dingo. I heard you say something to him about it when we first got here, but you never told me why we didn't find Makero. Why did your Dream sense lead you to Dingo and not Makero and the group?"

Saderia sighed. "It was because my instinct was telling me to go in two completely different directions," she explained. "At the time, I didn't

know why it would do that. All I wanted was to find Dad and the others back then, but I think one direction led to them and the other led to Dingo. I picked the direction that led to Dingo, I guess. It was that way for a while whenever we got lost again: there were always two different directions. The only time my instinct gave me one specific direction was the last time we got lost and that was because I had made up my mind about what I wanted to do first: find Dingo.”

Dash blinked in surprise. “So your Dream sense was leading us here the whole time?”

Saderia smiled. “I think so, Dash. We were destined to be here all along.”

The harsh, scraping sound of rock rubbing against rock made Saderia look up in surprise. She smiled when she saw Dingo hesitantly pad into the den. He glanced up at them then looked back down as he slowly slipped over to the hollowed rocks and took a few sips of water. Saderia sat back and watched him carefully when he finally looked up at him. His brown eyes narrowed with unease.

Saderia gave him a weak smile. “Are you okay?”

Dingo looked down. “I’m fine.” His eyes darted to the book lying just a few inches away from him. “I suppose you still want to finish reading it.”

Saderia flicked him gently with her tail. “We don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

He shook his head. “No, I have to know what it says. I’ve been putting it off for too long.” Taking a deep breath, he slowly looked up and met her gaze. “Can you keep reading it?”

“Of course.” Saderia slowly pulled the book over to her and flipped through the fragile pages until she found the one she had left off on. Glancing up as Dingo quietly settled down beside her and Dash hovered over her shoulder, she took a deep breath and cleared her throat. Looking down at the worn page, she slowly began to read.

*Dingo, I told you a long time ago not to read some parts of my journal until much, much later. This is where it gets bad, worse than before.*

*Only read this when it's the right time and if you really want to know what happened.*

*All right, here it goes. A few weeks ago, Bone and I had been fighting more than usual...if that's possible. We're almost always going at each others' throats; it's been that way for a while, but lately it's gotten worse. I tried to tell myself that he didn't really hate me. Because of that, I wanted to believe that we might be friends again when he started being friendly to me the other day. Remind me not to give anyone the benefit of the doubt ever again.*

*It started out as an ordinary day, but when I went to go get a sip of water from the water trough, Bone came up and talked to me. I thought he was going to start a fight. That's why I was surprised when he actually asked me to hang out with him away from camp rather than insult me. I decided to go with him because he sounded friendly and I really wanted to believe we could somehow be friends again. Yeah right.*

*If you recall, Dingo, I went missing that day. Later, you told me that Bone returned without me and simply said we had split up and gone separate ways in the desert and he had no idea where I was. He's a filthy liar. When I finally returned and woke up you, Rip, Tear, and Bone in our den, I was covered in blood. I don't know how bad I looked, but it must have been really bad because I can still remember the look I saw on your face.*

*You and Rip and Tear asked what had happened to me. Bone looked at me like he was seeing a ghost. Maybe that's what he thought I was. You see, Bone was pretty certain I was dead. He didn't say anything when you and the others asked what had happened to me. I told you all some ridiculous excuse of how an outcast had done that to me. I lied. It was the first thing I could come up with and I lied because no one but you, Dingo, would believe the truth and I would be in even more trouble if I tried to tell it. Everyone believed the lie I told, but I think you know just as well as me and Bone that it was a lie.*

*The truth is I fell in the Snake Pit.*

*Dingo gasped in horror. "What?!"*

*"That chasm we were in?" Saderia exclaimed.*

*Dash gaped at the book in surprise. "How did she live to write this? How did she even get out and survive?"*

“I don’t know,” Dingo exclaimed. “I never knew any of this!” He shook his head fiercely. “That couldn’t have happened! She would have been killed down there! I found her... later.”

Saderia blinked in wonder and turned back to the page, her eyes wide with curiosity.

*Actually, ‘fell’ isn’t the right word.*

*Let’s stick to the Snake Pit. Believe me, it’s the more pleasant topic here.*

*It turns out the old stories are true. Down in the Snake Pit, there are thousands of snakes: cobras, vipers, pythons, all the ones we’ve heard about. They’re evil and ruthless and unfeeling and if I hadn’t escaped, they would have eaten me alive just like the stories say. And just like we’ve been told, the Snake Pit is deeper than you can ever imagine. I can remember falling almost perfectly. There was nothing but pure darkness everywhere. It was almost like being asleep actually, except every inch of me was tense with fear like I was having a nightmare. I don’t know how much time passed until I hit the bottom; when there’s nothing around you but blackness, telling time is impossible.*

*I tried to grab onto the sides to break my fall, but it didn’t work too well. When I hit the bottom, I was struck by hundreds of sharp stones and rocks and maybe even chipped pieces of bones. I couldn’t move at first and I thought I was dead. The only thing I could do was lay there, imagining all those disgusting stories of snakes poisoning their victims or eating them alive. I felt like I was being watched by a million malevolent eyes—and I probably was. Then I heard a hissing sound and when I squinted to see through the darkness, I could see the snakes start slithering toward me. As you can imagine, they were pretty excited to see me.*

*I don’t know where I got the strength, but somehow I managed to get up even though the pain was almost unbearable. I started climbing up the side of the abyss and the snakes came after me. They bit me and poisoned me, but I forced myself not to think about any of that and just kept going. I knew if I let the pain or the fear get to me I would fall and that would be the end of me. I wasn’t ready to die yet. I thought of you, Dingo, and all the fun things we did together. I thought about what would happen to you if I died. I*

*didn't want to leave you, so thinking of you forced me to keep going even though I thought it was hopeless.*

*I finally managed to make it to the top. How, I don't know. I probably never will understand how I managed to survive the deadliest place in the desert. It didn't matter anyway. After I took care of the poison, I just walked back to camp. Bone was waiting for me there, but I didn't know what else to do. I woke up the rest of you and, well, you know the rest. I don't know when you're going to read this, Dingo, if you're ever going to read this, but just know that you're the only reason I haven't started screaming now that I realize I'm going to have to share the same den with the dingo that was almost my killer.*

Dingo stared at the page in horror. His eyes stretched wide with shock and dismay, never blinking. His entire body seemed to freeze with disbelief and his large claws dug deep into the sand as if to hold himself together. Slowly he shook his head, as if unable to believe what he had heard and what he saw on the page.

Dash looked up at him in surprise. "What happened afterward?"

Dingo blinked rapidly. "Sh-she came into our den," he stammered. "She looked...horrible. She was covered in blood and bruises... Bone was sleeping in our den back then because he wasn't Second in Command yet and the rest of us all woke up when she clawed him. She told us that outcasts did it to her when we asked her what happened. I didn't...I didn't think it was possible, but I never knew. I never would have guessed..."

Saderia slowly looked up at him, her amber eyes wide with distress when she read the horror in his light brown gaze. "Dingo..." she whispered. "Are you okay?"

Dingo didn't reply. Staring wildly at the page, he blinked and seemed to tear himself away from the words by jerking his head away from the book and squeezing his eyes shut.

Saderia carefully rested her paw on his shoulder. "Dingo..." she murmured.

"I'm fine," he growled. He blinked rapidly and glanced back at them, letting out a long, slow breath.

"Are you sure?" she whispered. "You don't look too good."

Dingo shook his head rapidly, blinking fiercely and shivering when he glanced back at the page. "It's just...shocking, that's all. This...how could this have happened?" A low growl rumbled in his throat. "She would have been eaten if she had fallen in the Snake Pit! There's just no way she could have lived to tell about it! This...it couldn't have happened!"

Saderia looked down. Her gaze flicked to her paws as she struggled to think of something to say something to Dingo. Remembering the horrors of the Snake Pit and her desperate attempts to escape, she almost couldn't believe Claw had gotten out by herself. She looked up when Dash suddenly let out a sharp, fearful gasp.

His wide amber gaze darted to hers. "Wait a minute!" he exclaimed. "Saderia, when we were down in the Snake Pit, didn't that one snake say...?"

Saderia's eyes widened in shock as the memory raced through her mind. She let out a gasp as she felt herself transported back in time to the awful darkness of the pit. Her paws tingled with fear and disgust when she remembered hitting the ground, being tied up with vines, and being thrown onto the smooth, bloody stone to be eaten. Her eyes widened with fear when she remembered the gleam of the king cobra's eyes as he stared into hers. She shivered with fear, almost able to feel the breath of the king cobra's hiss against her ears as he sneered: *"Did the prisoners really think they could get away? Only one dingo has ever escaped the Snake Pit and that was a long time ago."*

She gasped. "That's right!" Dingo turned to stare at her in shock as she stammered, "That king cobra that ruled the snakes said that a dingo had escaped the Snake Pit a long time ago!"

Dingo's eyes widened in distress and he whirled back around to stare at the page, his paws almost shaking with dismay. "But how...?" he whispered. "How did she fall in the Snake Pit?" He closed his eyes and suddenly a low growl erupted from his chest. When he opened his eyes once more, their deep brown depths were blazing with fury. *"Why was she pushed?"*

Saderia blinked and turned to look at the page, her eyes wide with wonder.

*Like I said, 'fell' isn't the right word.*

*Bone pushed me.*

*Dingo let out a low snarl. "I knew it."*

*After Bone asked me to go hang out with him in the desert, I followed him out of camp. He pretended to be nice to me at first, but as soon as we got far away from camp, he asked me if I wanted to play tag like we used to when we were pups. I agreed because I hoped we could go back to being friends the way we used to be and he started chasing me. It seemed fun until I realized where I was being chased. I skidded to a halt right on the edge of the Snake Pit.*

*I whirled around and asked Bone what we were doing by the Snake Pit. I don't know what I thought was happening. Maybe I thought we had gone there on accident or maybe I subconsciously knew what was going to happen. Either way, I was scared and I started babbling on about something, hoping to figure out what was going on. I remember saying something like: "The Snake Pit is dangerous! It means a slow and painful death! What are we doing here?"*

*Bone just smirked at me and said, "Sorry, Claw. You're okay for a sister. But you annoy me just a little too much."*

*He pushed me back until my paw was right on the edge of the Snake Pit. I tried to get around him, but he blocked my way. I demanded to know what was happening.*

*He told me: "You're the most annoying sister in the pack. But Dingo's an even worse brother. This is all happening because of him. Remember that right before you die."*

*I tried to get around him or fight back, but I couldn't do anything. He shoved me back and growled, "Have fun in the Snake Pit, Claw" before he threw me off the edge. My mind just went blank and I let out a howl, hoping someone would hear me or Bone would rethink this and help me, but he didn't and no one heard. He just sneered at me and that was the last thing I saw before I disappeared into the darkness all around me.*

*Trying to survive the Snake Pit was almost impossible, but when I finally got out, I had to face something even harder: letting Bone get away with it. You know as well as I do that if I tried to tell Dagger what he did and incriminate Bone, he would do either one of two things: kill me or exile*



*me. It's not exactly a secret at this point that he and Bone are plotting to make Bone Second in Command and any accusation would mess up their plans.*

*The only reason I kept this from you was to make sure Bone didn't try to kill you, too. I'm in enough danger as it is; I don't want to have to worry about him coming after you to try to kill you, too. You don't need to get mixed up in this madness. I don't need to get mixed up in it. But now that I am, I'm not taking anyone down with me. Only Bone seems to enjoy that.*

Dingo stared down at the page as silence spread out between them. His eyes were wide and dull as if he couldn't believe what he had heard. Seeming almost frozen in place, he stared blankly down at the page, his paws shaking against the sand. Slowly he opened his mouth to speak and winced when a weak, stammering whisper escaped his throat.

"He did this...just to hurt me?"

"Dingo?" Saderia whispered. She glanced up and felt a tingle of unease when she saw the lifelessness in his wide brown gaze.

"Our own sister," he murmured. "All this time I was being chased by a dingo who pushed his own sister in the Snake Pit." His eyes squeezed shut and a low, dangerous growl tore out of his throat. "I should have killed him when I had the chance," he snarled, his eyes opening and blazing with hatred.

Saderia carefully placed a paw on his shoulder, but he immediately pulled away and turned away from them, hanging his head down by his chest. His ears drooped over his eyes as he slowly shook his head. "Why wasn't I there to help her?" he murmured. "Why did I let her go with Bone when I knew all along he was nothing but trouble?" His eyes squeezed shut. "Why was it her? If Bone hated me so much, why didn't he just do it to me?"

Saderia let out a long, sad sigh. "I don't know, Dingo, but no matter what happened, it's not your fault. You didn't make Bone hate you, you didn't make him so cruel, and you didn't make him push Claw into the Snake Pit."

He didn't look up. "I should have looked after Claw better..."

Saderia gently pressed her paw onto his shoulder. “You couldn’t watch her every second of every day and even if you could, it wouldn’t have been right. If you had watched her all the time just to make sure she didn’t die, she wouldn’t have been able to live. She wouldn’t have been able to take risks and make her own choices. You did the best thing you could for her: you let her live her life. That’s the best thing anyone could do. If Bone was this determined to get her, he would have found some way to get around you no matter what you did. There was nothing more you could have done to save her.”

Dingo sighed and slowly looked up, his light brown eyes dull and distant. Shaking himself, he carefully glanced down at the journal and tried not to shiver when his gaze caught on the words Claw had written. He glanced at the ground. “Keep reading.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “Are you sure? We can take a break if you want.”

“No,” Dingo growled sternly. “Keep reading. I have to know the rest.”

Saderia paused then hesitantly turned the page and peered down at it. She felt a tingle of apprehension and unease when she noticed tearstains spattered across the paper.

*This is the worst day of my life. Worse than Bone. Worse than the Snake Pit.*

*Fang is dead.*

*I don’t even know what to think. Right now, I don’t want to think. You already know how I feel, Dingo, so it doesn’t matter. None of it matters anymore. The worst part might not even be that he’s dead; it’s that his killer won’t be punished. It wasn’t outcasts, Dingo, like the pack thought it was. Maybe a time will come when you will know the truth about this, too. Just don’t tell Bone when you read this if he hasn’t already made it clear he’s probably out to get you, too.*

*Yesterday, I was out in the desert alone and I accidentally stumbled onto Bone. He didn’t see me, so I immediately crouched down to try to get a closer look at what he was doing. Ever since the Snake Pit ‘incident’, I’ve been jumpy and suspicious around him and today was no exception.*

When I got closer and squinted to see, I realized he was standing over a hollowed out rock filled with tarantulas. I didn't know what he would ever want with tarantulas, but whatever it was, it wasn't good. He looked up and I ran back to camp to make sure he didn't see me. To make sure he didn't try to do anything to either of us, I hid out with you in the den for the rest of the day. I wanted to tell Fang what I saw since he, as Second in Command, might be able to do something about it, but he was out hunting for most of the day. He probably wouldn't have been able to do anything anyway. Even as Second in Command he would get in trouble for accusing Bone.

The rest of the day was pretty peaceful and Bone came back to our den just before nighttime without doing anything to anybody. I tried to watch him, but I ended up falling asleep because watching him is all I've been doing at night. I woke up some time in the middle of the night and realized Bone wasn't in the den with us. I immediately checked to make sure you were still breathing, but once I was sure you were okay, I went out into the camp to look around. I don't know why, but I automatically headed toward Fang's den. It was probably just an instinctual reaction; whenever something went wrong, I usually either went to him or you.

When I looked into Fang's den, I saw him laying on his side. I walked over to him and called his name and tried to shake him awake, but no matter what I did he wouldn't wake up. I looked down and saw a tiny mark on his chest at the same time I saw a tarantula come scuttling out from behind his paw. I jumped back and watched it move toward the entrance of the den where it was snatched up by a dark brown paw. I tried to wake up Fang, but a low growl sounded from outside the den. The only thing I could do was run out of there as fast as I could before I got hurt. When I looked back, I saw a dark brown dingo slip into Fang's den. Bone.

I raced back out into the camp, but before I could go to Fang's den to confront Bone, I saw him start to back out of the den. I ducked behind a sand dune and watched as Bone backed out of the den, dragging Fang by the scruff of his neck. When he didn't jump awake and smack Bone away, I knew he was gone. I followed him as he dragged Fang's body out into the desert far away from camp. I didn't want to follow, but I felt like I had to. I watched when Bone finally threw him onto the ground and bit his neck to

*make it look like an outcast had killed him and not spider poison. Afterwards, he ran back to camp as fast as he could.*

*I don't know how long I stood out there over Fang's body. It was as if I almost couldn't believe what was happening. I stayed out there for hours after the sun rose in the sky, as if I was frozen to the spot. Bone's the one that found me and the only reason he didn't kill me was because another dingo was with him. The other dingo took me back to the camp while Bone stayed out. When I got back to camp, everybody was in a panic. Dingoes were running around calling out for search parties to look for Fang. Dagger was growling at everyone who wasn't already panicking and you, Rip, and Tear were just looking around at all the madness with this look as if you could hardly believe what was happening. I couldn't either.*

*You don't know how badly I wanted to tell you what happened, but I didn't want to get you involved. It was too hard to put you in danger and the only other dingo I might have been able to confide in was dead.*

*A few hours later, Bone returned to camp with this look of fake horror on his face. He let out a howl and told everyone that Fang was dead. Killed by outcasts. Because of his disgusting act, everyone believed him and it was as if the entire camp started howling with dismay. I've never seen the pack express any kind of remorse over any death or tragedy; this was the closest they've ever come to seeming decent. Everybody liked Fang. That was probably one of the reasons Bone couldn't stand him in the first place.*

*The rest is all a blur. The pack brought Fang's body back to camp to hold a funeral and then Dagger called for a meeting to appoint a new Second in Command: Bone. Surprise, surprise. He got away with it.*

Dingo gaped at the page, his eyes wide with shock and dismay. "I remember that," he murmured. "I always wondered about that, too. It didn't make any sense for Fang to have been killed by outcasts. I just never knew it could be anyone else." He shook his head in disgust. "It makes sense. Bone despised Fang almost more than me because he was Second in Command, a position he wanted for himself." He let out a growl then froze as a tinge of shock flickered into his stunned light brown gaze.

Saderia glanced up at him. "What is it?"

"This must have been what Bone was accusing me of," Dingo stammered. "Of 'knowing things'. He would be ruined if anyone in the

pack knew he killed Fang. Like Claw said in the journal, everyone liked Fang. He was the only dingo in the camp that managed to keep things under control when bad things started to happen and he was probably the only one the dingoes ever looked up to. Bone must have thought Claw told me all this and that I would tell somebody...”

Saderia looked up at him in surprise. “So you finally know what he meant?”

Dingo nodded grimly. “It looks like it.” He gestured to the page with a long sigh. “Keep reading. We might as well finish up and see if there’s anything else I should know.”

Saderia glanced down and let out a soft breath of unease when she turned the page and noticed another cluster of tearstained words.

*My best friend is dead.*

*Ever since Fang died, Rain stopped taking care of herself and I didn’t know what to do. After Bone took Fang’s old Second in Command den and I let Fang’s sister move in with us, I’ve been trying to take care of her, but Dingo, you know how fragile Rain is. Fang was the only reason she survived as long as she did. I tried to take care of her, but all she could ever think about was Fang. She couldn’t eat or sleep or anything. I tried to help her, but I just couldn’t. She couldn’t get better. I tried everything I could to keep her alive, but I just couldn’t. And now she’s dead.*

*Before she died, we talked about all the things we used to do as pups and all the great things her brother did. She seemed happy. And then she said goodbye. I tried one last time to help her, but I knew it wouldn’t do any good. I said goodbye, too. I stayed by her side for a long time and then I went to ask someone to tell the Leader and Bone to organize a funeral for her. I couldn’t face them at the time. I was afraid I’d snap and try to kill them.*

Dingo sighed and looked away. “Claw was so upset when that happened. Rain was her best friend.”

“I can’t even imagine,” Saderia murmured, wondering with a shiver how she would feel if she ever lost her best friend. Her tail instinctively wrapped around Dash’s as the horrible thought flickered through her mind.

Dingo just looked at his paws. “Once she lost her brother, Rain just couldn’t function anymore. Like it says in the book, he was the only one that protected her and kept her alive. Claw and I tried to look after her, but it didn’t help.”

“I’m sorry,” Saderia whispered, glancing up at him with sad amber eyes.

Dingo just shook his head. “It’s okay, Saderia. Just keep reading.”

“If you’re sure.” Her tail flicked forcefully across the sandy ground when she anxiously stared down at the page and began to read it out loud.

*Dingo, I need some time alone to think about things. I want to plan to change the pack, so that dingoes like Bone won’t get away with horrible crimes. I don’t know what I can possibly do. I don’t know if I’m going to get a chance to do it. But I’m going to go out in the desert to try to plan to change the pack. I don’t know if I’ll even have time to come up with something decent to try to change it and I know this is probably a futile hope, but I want to feel like I’m actually doing something to help. I already spent time with you and our decent brothers, Rip and Tear, and I hope you won’t be hurt too bad when this is over.*

*I’m sorry if this turns out badly and if it does, don’t feel bad about not coming with me to plan in the desert because I really just wanted some time alone. I only asked you to come so that you could be assured that I wouldn’t do anything that could get me hurt. Anyway, this will most likely be my last entry. I love you, Dingo.*

*Claw*

Saderia paused and let her voice trail off. Her eyes opened wide with surprise and wonder. It was almost as if Claw had somehow known she was going to die.

“She wrote that just before she was killed,” Dingo murmured, staring at the page and confirming what Saderia had guessed. “Before Bone killed her.” He looked away and let out a long, shaky sigh. “If I had gone with her, she would still be alive.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” Saderia protested. “You had no way of knowing.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he growled.

“Saderia’s right,” Dash said, glancing up at Dingo with sympathetic amber eyes. “You had no way of knowing what would happen.”

“He’s right. You can’t just keep blaming yourself,” Saderia whispered.

Dingo just sighed. “It doesn’t matter. This must be the end anyway. No more entries.” He glanced down and soundlessly closed the book before wrapping his paws around the tattered spine to pick it up and put it away. As he lifted the book, however, a single torn page silently slipped out of the book and fluttered down to the ground.

Frowning, Saderia padded forward and gently picked it up in her paws. Her eyes widened in surprise when she realized it was a page she hadn’t read before. She looked up as Dash and Dingo crowded around her and began examining the page with obvious curiosity.

“Should I read it?” she asked, looking up into Dingo’s eyes.

Dingo hesitated. “I don’t see why not.”

Looking down, Saderia carefully began to look over the neat letters before quietly starting to read.

*Dingo,*

*Right before I went out alone in the desert, I asked you to promise me to never give up and to always keep going even when it got tough. I know that promise will be hard to stick to because life will probably get harder, but I hope that you can try. And even if you can’t, I will always love you no matter what.*

*My life hasn’t been easy as you can see if you’ve read the rest of this journal, but it hasn’t been all bad. I managed to get over all the hardships and just keep living, like you should. Don’t let Bone or anybody get to you. You were the only reason I even kept living sometimes, so don’t ever let Bone get you down. You’re my closest friend. I’ve counted on you for so long to help me through this difficult life and I know you feel the same way about me. If something happens in the future, remember your promise and don’t let anything ruin your life.*

*I know I’m probably going to die. And I’m not afraid. I was, at first, but now I’ve just decided to accept it because there’s nothing I can do. What I am afraid of is leaving you when I die and not being able to be there to*

help you if something happens to you. I've been trying to let you know how much you mean to me in these last few days. I want to make sure you remember me when I'm dead, but I also want to make sure you'll be okay.

I don't know for sure that I'm going to die, but I know it's likely going to happen. Bone hates me and he knows that I saw what he did. He's afraid I'll destroy him with that information and he wants me dead so that I can never tell anyone that he killed Fang. I can't watch him and constantly look over both shoulders for the rest of my life. I just can't live like that and even if I could, he'd probably still get me eventually. I can't fight him anymore because I'm just too weak.

If you read the entries in my journal, you'll know that Bone pushed me in the Snake Pit. The snakes bit me and poisoned me and even though I got rid of most of the venom, there was still a bit of poison left in me. It's not enough to kill me, but it has weakened me a lot and I'm in no state to fight if Bone attacks. I might get stronger eventually, but probably not soon enough. For now, I'm an easy target. And if I constantly stay up at night and watch Bone all the time, I'll just get weaker and become easier prey. I'm stuck, Dingo, which is why I know I'm going to die.

I don't know how much time I have, so I'm going to cherish it. That's why I'm writing you this letter. I want you to know that I'm not afraid. It's just something that's going to happen. I can't spend what time I have left fearing it and I want to tell you that whatever you do, I'll always love you and I'll always be proud of you. You were the only one who was there for me, the only one who I could talk to, the only one who understood me. This letter isn't just to say goodbye. It's to beg you not to let Bone and the other dingoes get to you and destroy you when I'm gone.

It hurts me to know that I only have a short time left with you, but maybe when I die I'll be somewhere where I can see you and make sure you're doing all right. If that's what happens, I'll be with you every second of every day.

There's a lot I want to say, but not enough time to say it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you any of what's in this journal, but I wanted to protect you so that Bone wouldn't try to hurt you, too. I'm terrified of him doing that. Please watch your back. You're strong enough to survive without my help, whether you believe that or not. I know you can do it, Dingo. I believe in you.



*I love you, Dingo. Remember me.*

*Love,  
Claw*

Dingo stared down at the page with wide brown eyes and shaky paws. Saderia glanced up at him as he carefully took the paper from her paws and looked it over, his eyes damp with sadness and gratitude. She watched him closely as he slowly pulled himself to his paws, slipped the paper back into the journal, and slid the book back into the corner. When he turned around to face her and Dash, a slow, sad smile spread across his face.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “I know the truth now. About everything. It was much easier with you two here.”

Saderia smiled back. “You’re welcome, Dingo. Thank you for saving us and letting us stay here.”

Dingo flicked his tail to wave away her thanks. “It was no problem.” He glanced toward the smooth stone laying pressed up against the wall and gestured to it with his paw. “It’s getting late. You two should probably get some sleep.”

Saderia shrugged and began padding toward the stone. “You should rest, too.”

Dingo sighed. “All right.” He paced calmly over to his sleeping place beside the smooth stone and flopped down on the ground. His eyes darted up to her and Dash when they tiredly climbed onto the stone.

He smiled. “Goodnight, Saderia. Goodnight, Dash.”

Dash curled his tail over her back and carefully laid down beside her, smiling and calling a quiet goodnight to their new friend. Saderia laid her head against the stone and smiled back, her eyes beginning to slip shut.

“Goodnight, Dingo.”

Saderia’s eyes slowly fluttered open and a sharp gasp tore out of her throat when she found herself standing in the middle of a dark desert. She jumped to her paws, feeling her paw pads sink into the sand. A shiver of fear raced up her spine as her eyes darted wildly around the wispy desert, her mind spinning with fear and confusion.

Whirling around, she let out a gasp and froze in her tracks when she saw a dingo standing in front of her. Her mouth gaped open in shock. A

tremble of fear and disbelief raced through her body as she stared up at the wispy dingo and watched as the dingo stepped closer, her light brown fur rustling against the worn pink ribbon tied around her neck. The dingo's calm light brown eyes met her stunned amber gaze.

“Hello, Saderia. I’ve been waiting a long time to meet you.”

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Spirit

Saderia's eyes widened in shock as she stared at the translucent dingo. Her paws scuffled wildly through the sand as she backed away. Her gaze darted fearfully around the eerie desert, taking in the wispy sky and the silent, blurred sand dunes. Turning around, she stared at the dingo with eyes full of fear and wonder. The dingo stared back at her, a kind smile on her light brown face. Saderia's gaze traveled to the light pink ribbon tied around her neck. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized it was identical to the one in Dingo's den.

She looked up at the strange dingo in alarm. "Who are you?" she demanded.

The dingo smiled and took a step forward. "My name is Claw."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"Claw. I'm Dingo's sister." When Saderia gaped at her in shock, the strange dingo let out a soft laugh. "You believe in 'Dreams' and prophecies, but you don't believe in ghosts?"

Saderia's heart stopped. "Y-you're a *ghost*?"

She nodded. "What else would I be? I'm dead." She let out a sigh and gestured around her with her wispy brown paw. "Look around you. The last thing you remember is falling asleep and now you're out in the desert. I know you're used to having strange Dreams and this time I decided to drop by for a little visit."

Saderia's eyes widened in shock. "This is a Dream and I'm really seeing a ghost?"

Claw grinned. "You see the future and yet you're surprised to see a ghost."

"I...I just never thought about ghosts..." she stammered. Her whole body seemed tense with alarm as she glanced up at the light brown dingo. Was there really a ghost standing in front of her? She looked closely at the translucent dingo, scanning over her long light brown fur and shimmering

light brown eyes—eyes that reminded her eerily of Dingo’s. She found her gaze wandering to the faded, transparent pink ribbon wrapped around her neck. “Ghosts...really exist?” she whispered.

Claw smiled and nodded. “Yes, I exist.”

Saderia looked around wildly at the silent desert before whirling around to face Claw. “What...what are you doing here?” she demanded, her voice shaking with fear. “What do you want?”

Claw let out a sad sigh and stepped forward before raising her paw and putting it gently on Saderia’s shoulder. Saderia blinked when she just barely felt it and glanced to the side to see a transparent paw hovering just above her shoulder. No temperature radiated off of the ghostly paw.

“I’m here to talk to you,” she said. “I wanted to get to know you. After all, you are the one that saved my brother.”

Saderia blinked up at her in surprise. “Dingo? He’s the one that saved us. Not the other way around.”

Claw smiled. “You may think so, but you saved him, too.” She looked down with a soft sigh. “Anyway, I know it’s probably a bit...odd to see a ghost, but I just had to meet you. I mean, you’re the one that helped my brother and you’re the only living animal I’ve been able to talk to since I died.”

Saderia looked up in surprise. “Really?” After studying her for a long moment, she slowly started to relax. After all Dingo had told her about Claw, she seemed like a nice animal and the spirit in front of her seemed to match her exactly. Unless this was some sort of trick, she could probably trust her. She paused. “So...you’re proud of Dingo? You still love him?”

“Of course!” Claw exclaimed. “I watch him every day from...er, ghost land or whatever I’m supposed to call it.”

Saderia managed a slight smile when she saw the affectionate gleam in Claw’s light brown eyes. “That’s great. He...he thinks about you all the time, you know. He really misses you.”

She sighed and glanced down, sliding her ghostly paw off of Saderia’s shoulder. “I know. I wish he hadn’t been so hurt by what happened, but now that he has you two, he seems to be doing better.” She looked up and gave her a grateful smile. “Thanks, tiger. What you did for my brother really means a lot to me.”

“Y-you’re welcome,” Saderia stammered. She paused, her amber eyes glimmering with wonder and curiosity. “So you can watch him everyday? How?”

Claw flicked her with her tail. “I’m not going to tell you all the ghostly secrets!”

Saderia froze then shrugged sheepishly when she saw the playfulness in the spirit’s eyes. “Er...sorry.”

Claw smiled. “It’s fine. But yes, I’ve watched him ever since I became a ghost. I wanted to make sure he was okay.” She looked down. “I felt horrible knowing there was nothing I could do since I was dead and he was out there all alone. I couldn’t talk to him and I missed him. Life was really bad for him after I died and Bone took over.” She growled at the mention of her oldest brother. “Bone turned everyone against Dingo even more after I was gone. I hoped that at least Rip and Tear wouldn’t be so cold to him, but they were.

“I’ve worried for so long that he wouldn’t make it. I knew I should put more faith in my brother and I did believe in him, but I was scared for him. Bone already got me and now he was after him.” Her eyes suddenly glittered with pride. “But he made it. He’s happier now that he has you two to take care of and be friends with. I was so glad that you and your friend helped him. Thank you, Saderia. Really. I love my brother, but anyone could tell that he was losing it. You saved his life.”

“Y-you’re welcome,” Saderia stammered. “I like helping animals and he helped us, too.”

She smiled. “I know. I’ve seen all that you three have done for each other. I’ve been watching you, too.” She paused. “That doesn’t bother you, right?”

Saderia blinked, feeling a tingle of unease when she thought about a ghost watching her all the time. She quickly shook it off when she realized it really shouldn’t bother her that much. “I...I guess I don’t mind,” she replied. “But...why were you watching me?”

Claw shrugged and looked sheepishly at the ground. “Well, I always thought forest animals were interesting and I always wanted to meet one. When I saw you and your friend wandering around alone in the desert, I was kind of excited to see some of the forest animals. But there was

something else that made me want to watch you.” She met Saderia’s gaze with serious light brown eyes. “You’re special.”

Saderia frowned. “Special?”

Claw nodded excitedly. “Ghosts normally aren’t allowed to talk to the living like I’m talking to you now. That’s why I haven’t talked to Dingo in all this time. I couldn’t. And believe me, I’ve tried.” Her eyes glimmered with excitement and wonder. “The ghosts in the spirit world sometimes talk about animals that are *special*. They’ve told me that sometimes there are rare animals that can see us and talk to us. You’re one of the special ones. I think it’s because you have the ability to see the future in Dreams.”

Saderia blinked in surprise. “How do you know so much about me? Like how I can see things in Dreams?”

Claw shrugged. “Well, like I said, I’ve been watching you and I listened in when you were telling Dingo your story.”

“Wow,” Saderia murmured. “So I’m the only living animal you can talk to because of my Dreams?” She paused then looked up with curious amber eyes. “What about my Mom? She has the power of Dreams, too. Is she special?”

Claw shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know your Mom. All I know is that none of the dingoes are ‘special’. You’re the first special animal I’ve ever seen. You might even be the first special animal *any* of the ghosts have seen for years.”

“Wow,” she whispered again. Her tail flicked rapidly back and forth in amazement as she looked up at the ghostly dingo. “So if you’re a ghost... what about all the other animals that have died? Are they ghosts, too?”

Claw nodded. “Yep.”

“Like...Fang and Rain?”

Claw smiled. “Yeah, they’re there. I see Fang and Rain every day. We’re still friends and I try to hang around with them as much as possible.”

Saderia smiled back, remembering the names from Claw’s journal. When she looked up at the spirit, she opened her mouth to ask another question then froze when another thought crossed her mind. “Do...” She paused. “Do you know a lion named Dastarius? Is he a ghost?”

Claw shrugged. “Haven’t seen him.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, Saderia tried to shrug off a tiny tingle of wonder and disquiet. Looking up at the ghost standing in front of her, she

felt her heart skip when she suddenly remembered a strange moment from just a few weeks ago. She distinctly remembered hearing an odd, echoing voice exclaim, “She’s *special!*” in the first few days after she and Dash had gotten lost. Had that been Claw? “Claw...” Saderia hesitated. “Can you talk to...special animals like me outside of a Dream?”

She nodded with a light shrug. “Technically yes, but I like talking here better. My voice doesn’t sound so weird here.”

Saderia blinked. “What does your voice sound like when you talk to someone outside of a Dream?”

“Echo-like.”

Saderia’s eyes widened. “So that was you! A few days after Dash and I got lost, I heard your voice! You started to say ‘Forest food’ but then you said, ‘She’s *special!*’”

Claw laughed happily. “Okay, you caught me. Yes, that was me.”

Saderia nodded slowly, her amber eyes wide with understanding. “That’s why Dash couldn’t hear it. He’s not ‘special’, right?”

“Right.” She chuckled and smiled. “I didn’t even know you were special until you heard my voice. When I’m watching Dingo, I usually talk to him or myself, but he never hears or responds. I guess I was just used to no one hearing me. It was kind of a shock when you did.”

Saderia smiled back. “I guess it would be kind of surprising.” She paused then added, “That wasn’t the only time I heard your voice. I think when I was in Dingo’s den and I told him how Bone was messing with his head, I heard a voice say ‘Thank you.’ Was that you?”

Claw shrugged and glanced at her paws. “Yes, that was me. I hated watching what Bone was doing to my brother. It was worse than what he did to me. I wanted Dingo to see that he was manipulating him and I wanted to tell him to stop giving in to Bone, but he could never hear me. I’m glad someone finally made him see what was going on. He’s a lot better off now.”

Saderia nodded gratefully, but her smile faltered. “But he’s an outcast now...because of us.”

Claw let out a long sigh. “It’s really not your fault. The pack would have found some excuse to exile him sooner or later. I’m just glad him saving you was the excuse. Now he’s happier and now I can finally talk to a living animal, one that’s close to Dingo.”

Saderia nodded slowly, giving the spirit a grateful smile. "Thanks." She paused. "But why are you visiting me now? Why not earlier? And why visit me at all? I know you said you wanted to get to know me because I helped Dingo, but is there any other reason why you're here?"

Claw smiled slowly. "Yes, Saderia. I only came to visit you now because you just recently learned who I was and heard a little about me. I wanted to wait until you at least knew my name, so I wouldn't scare you too much. As for why I came to visit you...well, you have a good spirit. I've seen how you helped Dingo. I just thought...maybe you needed someone to guide you sometimes. I mean, you already have Dash and now Dingo, but there might be some things that they can't help you with. If you need someone to help give you some extra insight into some of your Dreams or maybe give you some kind of warning if something bad is about to happen in the future, I could help. You have to fulfill a prophecy, right? Having a ghost on your side could help!" She paused and her excited grin faltered. "Well, if you want my help, that is. If not, I won't bother you anymore."

Saderia blinked in shock. "*Bother* me? That would be amazing! It would be great if you could visit me and help me out if something happens in the future." Her eyes widened with surprise and astonishment. She was actually talking to a ghost; the ghost wanted to help her out. Ever since the hunters had forced her to leave her home, Saderia had met some strange animals, but she could have never guessed she would ever be friends with a ghost. If Claw really could watch her and other animals, she really could help her in the future if anything bad happened. "So you would come to me sometimes in Dreams if something goes wrong?"

"Yes, if you need me. Or I might just come to check on things." She paused. "That would be all right?"

Saderia grinned. "That would be incredible!"

She smiled. "Great. I'll see you sometime soon then. Bye for now, Saderia." She paused and suddenly her expression turned serious. "Just one more thing before you wake up: Don't tell Dingo you saw me tonight. Not yet anyway. He's just starting to get over my death and accept what happened. He's starting to get stronger. Once he's gotten strong enough to truly accept what happened and go on with his life, then you can tell him. Until then, please try to keep it a secret while he's still getting better. Telling him would just confuse him."



Saderia paused then gave Claw a soft smile. "I won't tell him, Claw. I'll wait until it's the right time."

Claw beamed. "Thank you, Saderia. See you later."

"See you," Saderia murmured. Her eyelids started to droop as the world around her began to darken.

Her eyes locked on Claw's bright, smiling face just before the ghostly desert disappeared into darkness and she found herself unconscious in her own personal dreamland.

Saderia's eyes slowly blinked open and stretched wide with surprise when she found herself staring down at a smooth, sandy stone. Daring to raise her head a bit, she glanced around at Dingo's den, her eyes scanning over the brown, rocky walls, the sandy floor, the hollowed out rocks...and Claw's ribbon and journal sitting in the corner. Letting out a small sigh of relief, she rested her back against the stone and thought back to her Dream. Her mind whirled with surprise and amazement. Had she really just met a ghost?

Pricking her ears, she turned and peered off toward the water-filled rocks when she heard soft voices begin speaking in the den. Recognizing the brown and dark brown fur of Dingo and Dash, she laid still and listened to them talk.

"Do you still miss your father?" Dingo asked. He glanced down and leaned forward to take a few sips of water from the hollowed out rocks.

Dash shrugged uncomfortably. "Sometimes," he admitted. "When he died, I felt more guilty than sad because I was kind of relieved he was gone. I was only sad because I wished he hadn't been so cold. I tried to change him, but it never worked."

Dingo sighed. "I know how that feels. I tried to change Bone when we were younger, but he's always been the same."

Dash leaned down to lap up a few drops of water. "Sometimes, there's just nothing you can do. It used to bug me that my Dad hated me, but I got over it. You just have to stop letting it get to you."

"I know," Dingo muttered. "For the most part, I have, but it still bothers me sometimes. I suppose I should just let it go and not think about it. Changing Bone and the pack is an impossible task. It's pretty obvious

that as long as he's in charge, it will always be the same horrible place it always has been."

Dash sighed. "The pack *should* change, but you can't keep worrying about them. They'll only change when they decide to; you can't force them. Maybe someday it will happen, but you shouldn't spend your whole life hoping for it."

Dingo flicked his tail. "Maybe you're right."

Smiling to herself, Saderia slowly raised herself up on the stone. She stretched out her legs and called out a greeting to Dash and Dingo when they turned around to face her. "Good morning," she said as she stepped forward and padded over to them. After taking a few quick sips of water, she looked up to face her two friends.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

Dingo nodded. "Yes. Did you?"

"Yeah," she replied, thinking of her meeting with Claw. Glancing between Dash and Dingo, she gave them a sheepish shrug. "Sorry, but I couldn't help but listen to your conversation. Dash is right and I can't really see much of a future for you in the desert. If we ever do find my parents, I don't want to leave you behind either. So I was wondering...when we find my parents, will you come live with us?"

Dingo's eyes widened in shock. "What? Live with you?"

Saderia faced him hopefully. "Will you?"

"I..." Dingo glanced at the entrance to the den behind him and turned back to Saderia. "I don't know. I mean...the desert is my home even if it's not much of one. But...wouldn't the forest animals be just a *bit* unhappy to see me? I mean, I am a dingo, after all."

Saderia shrugged. "It might take a while, but they would accept you eventually."

"We would make sure of that," Dash agreed with a sideways glance at Saderia.

Dingo blinked, his eyes stunned. "I...I guess I'll have to think about it. I'll bring you to the forest or wherever when I find your family. I might stay." He paused. "The forests are kind of creepy, though. I don't know if I could live in one."

"At least think about it," Saderia begged. "I don't think you could survive if you lived out here forever."

“Well, neither do I, but still,” Dingo murmured. He flicked his tail. “I’ll think about it, Saderia. When we find your family, you can talk to them and see if it would work out.” Casting an anxious glance back at the entrance to the den, he added, “Speaking of them, I should probably go to look for your parents.”

Saderia glanced at the entrance and shrugged. “If you want. Thank you.”

Dingo gave her a weak smile and began walking toward the slate covering the opening of the den, waving his tail in farewell. Saderia watched as he pushed the rocky covering aside and stepped out into the desert before quickly disappearing behind a large sheet of rock. As she stared at the rock, however, a frown began to spread across her face when she thought about what he had said. “*The forests are kind of creepy...*” Forests. Why had he mentioned more than one?

Feeling her heart began to pound, she wondered if there was another forest around the desert besides her home, one that Dingo knew about. Frowning deeper, she wondered why Dingo hadn’t told her about it if it was really there; wouldn’t he think Saderia’s family might gravitate to a forest like their own home? Her eyes widened in alarm when a darker thought crossed her mind. Was he hiding it?

Dingo kept low to the ground as he made his way through the desert. He hadn’t wanted to check the strange forest on the other side of the desert, not with all the weird rumors he had heard about it over the years. That, and the fact that he liked having Saderia and Dash stay with him. To be honest, he hadn’t wanted them to leave, but now that they had offered to let him live with them, maybe he *could* live in a forest. Maybe it would be better. He wasn’t sure he would be quite comfortable leaving the desert, but he was running out of options. He would probably be safer in one of the forests even if they were living in the weird one.

As he slunk forward, he pricked his ears and looked around, keeping his eyes open for any sign of an ambush. He had already decided to briefly search the area around the weird forest to see if any of the forest animals were there. It couldn’t hurt much even though it was rumored that there were strange creatures and strange goings-on in that forest. It was the second most hated place the desert knew for a reason, but perhaps it wasn’t

as bad as the old dingo stories had made it out to be. Either way, he still had to check to see if Saderia's family was there.

After taking a deep breath, he picked up his pace and started running, eager to get there to check it out and get it over with. If Saderia's family was there, he would have some semi-good news for Saderia and Dash and he wanted them to be happy. He ran faster at the thought of doing something good for the two forest animals he had come to like...his *friends*...

He smiled and moved faster then suddenly froze. His smile twisted into a grimace of fear when a low, dangerous growl erupted from behind him. He immediately whirled around and let out a gasp when he found himself looking directly into the dark, sneering face of Bone.

"What are you doing here?" Dingo exclaimed.

Bone glared at him. "What are *you* doing here? Hunting in the pack's territory?"

"You have the whole desert and I can't even have one little piece of food?" Dingo snarled.

"No, lowlife. The desert belongs to the pack. And guess what else? You're in a lot of trouble."

Dingo took a few steps back, preparing to fight. "Yeah, well, you haven't been able to kill me before and my life's actually improving since I was exiled. And guess what else? I know what you did."

"I knew it." Bone took a threatening step toward him and Dingo backed away.

"You don't scare me, Bone," Dingo snarled. "Say what you want, do what you want, I don't care. Just leave me alone. I'm done with the pack."

Bone let out a humorless laugh. "But I'm not done with you."

"Even if I know what you did, who would believe me now that I'm an outcast?" Dingo growled exasperatedly.

Bone snickered. "No one, but I hate you. I'm going to kill you somehow. Speaking of which, guess who else is with me?"

"Rock?"

"Not this time. Mommy, Daddy, and your second favorite brothers," he replied, sounding just as scathing and sarcastic as Dingo.

That threw him off a bit, but he didn't let Bone know it. "Who's my favorite brother then? You?" he stalled, keeping his tone mocking so as not

to betray his fear.

Bone chuckled. "Exactly."

Dingo shook his head. "You disgust me." He glanced discreetly around at the dunes, trying to figure out where the other dingoes were. "You knew where to find me?"

Bone grinned as if sensing Dingo was looking for a way out. "I had an idea."

"And you're going to kill me in front of our whole family?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. They won't care. You're an outcast now. I can get away with it. And you deserve it."

*He's just playing a sick game with your mind.* Dingo remembered what Saderia had told him and kept it in mind. "How nice." He prepared to run for it, but Bone just grinned.

"Attack!" he howled.

With a sharp yelp, Dingo dived to the side before Bone could grab him. He quickly leapt to his paws and ran, dimly aware of his brothers, Rip and Tear; his mother, Sand; and his father, Dagger, appearing from behind a sand dune and chasing after him. Bone was in the lead. Dingo knew why Bone had asked his family to come with him; he wanted to hurt him with the fact that his whole family was against him. But it didn't have to bother him if he didn't let it. His family had never liked him anyway; why should he give them the gratification of seeing him get upset when there was no reason to be?

Dingo crouched low to the ground as he darted through the desert, ignoring the growls and taunts behind him. After rounding a sand dune, he whirled around to look back and heaved a sigh when he realized no one was behind him. Warily, he turned around only to jump back and let out a yelp of shock when he saw Rip sitting in front of him, glaring and lashing his tail. Dingo froze in alarm.

"Dingo," Rip growled. He narrowed his eyes. "Going somewhere?"

Dingo opened his mouth, but no words came out as he stared at his brother, feeling a flash of pain. Rip had been nice to him on a few occasions and Dingo still liked his other two brothers. Now they hated him as much as Bone just because he was an outcast.

Rip slowly pushed himself to his paws and lashed his tail across the sand, preparing to attack him or call Bone. Before he could make a move,

Dingo immediately shushed him with an urgent whisper.

“Wait, Rip,” he hissed. “Think about this first. What reason do you have to want me dead?”

Rip narrowed his eyes. “Bone wants you dead and he has his reasons. And don’t even think about running because I’ll call the others and they’ll surround you.”

“I didn’t ask about Bone’s reasons, I asked about *yours*,” Dingo pointed out as calmly as possible.

“Are you going to try to talk me out of killing you because ‘we’re brothers’?” Rip demanded. “Because you can save your breath.”

Dingo sighed. “I wasn’t planning on using that again. Rip, you have nothing against me. So why should you attack me?”

“You’re an outcast. And Bone wants you to die. What else am I supposed to do? Besides, I’ve always hated you anyway.”

Dingo chuckled humorlessly. “Oh, so now you’ve *always* hated me. And that’s not just something Bone makes you say.”

Rip growled. “I hate it when you mess with my head!”

Dingo glared at him. “*I’m* the one messing with your head?”

“That’s it! I—”

“Wait,” Dingo interrupted, his exasperated gaze melting into one of urgency and fear. “Just think about it. Do you really want to kill me?”

Rip bared his fangs. “Why shouldn’t I?”

“Maybe because I’ve tried to be nice to you? Because I appreciate you when Bone doesn’t? Why do you always listen to Bone when it’s obvious he doesn’t care about you at all? He just uses you as a minion. If you died right this minute, he wouldn’t bat an eyelid!”

“That’s not true!” Rip protested, his tail lashing furiously back and forth.

“Isn’t it?”

Rip paused and drew back, seeming almost uncertain. For a long moment, he simply stared at Dingo with wide eyes before he violently shook his head and narrowed his eyes, letting out a low, dangerous growl. “Forget it,” he snarled. “I know what you’re trying to do.” His paws shook with fury. “I hope Bone destroys you.” Without giving Dingo time to protest, he threw back his head and let out a loud howl, summoning the others.

Dingo whirled around as Bone, Tear, Dagger, and Sand leapt out from behind the sand dunes and surrounded him, glaring at him and letting out low snarls. With a tingle of fear, Dingo took a deep breath, knowing he would have to fight his way out and run. But to fight five of them?

Making sure they didn't see how intimidated he was, he faced them bravely. He might have been able to talk himself out of it if it was just Rip and Tear, but Bone was controlling them. There would be no bargaining with him.

"How's it feel to be the loser again?" Bone sneered.

Dingo made himself smile pleasantly. "Pretty good, Bone. I have some regrets, but if I die now, I'll die happy. Guess you didn't manage to break me like you wanted. Too bad."

Bone glared at him. "Have you finally lost your mind?"

Dingo just shrugged. "Maybe. If I have, it isn't as bad as I thought it would be."

Rip growled. "Let's just get rid of him. I don't like dealing with crazy dingoes." When Dingo spared a glance at Rip, he realized his brother already seemed a little unsure about turning him in. Rip probably just wanted to get it over with so he wouldn't have time to think about what he'd done.

"Are you *afraid* of him?" Bone demanded.

"Well, he sounds pretty insane," Tear said. "Do we have to drag it out?"

"Yeah, don't play with your food and all that," Rip added, glancing anxiously between the two of them.

"Would you three stop bickering?" Sand snarled. "This stupid outcast could easily get away while you're busy chatting with each other!"

"This stupid outcast is your son," Dingo growled through gritted teeth. Sand didn't reply, so she either didn't hear him or didn't care.

"Let's just finish it," Dagger snarled. "I've got better things to do than sit around listening to you three argue."

Dingo snorted. "Like what? You're the pack's Leader and yet you never do *anything*. And anything you should do, you make Bone do for you. I kind of feel sorry for him actually."

"*You pity me?*" Bone growled. "All right, enough of this. You have to die." He glanced furiously around at his family. "Attack!"

Rip sprang forward, as Dingo knew he would. Dingo ducked under him and rapidly dodged Tear, who came running after him. Rip and Tear whirled around with dark snarls, but by that time, Dingo had already bolted away. Dagger lunged toward him and tried to smack him with his paw, but Dingo ducked under it and tried to run. Unfortunately, Sand was faster and she jumped onto his shoulders to push him into the ground, slashing his belly with her claws before he could pick himself up. By that time, Rip and Tear had caught up with them and Dingo just barely managed to leap away from their attacks. He stumbled, a bit off balance, and felt a sharp sting on his side. He ducked away before Dagger could get in any worse hits then let out a yelp when Sand jumped on him and shoved him to the ground.

For a moment, they rolled on the ground, Dingo catching her paws to stop her from hurting him and dodging her fangs without doing any damage to her.

“Sand, get off of me. I don’t want to hurt you,” Dingo growled through gritted teeth.

“Good, it’ll be easier for me to get rid of you then.” Sand’s dark brown eyes gleamed in the sunlight.

“I said I didn’t want to, not that I wouldn’t,” Dingo growled dryly. Before Sand could react, his paw smacked against her face and he pushed himself away from her while she was temporarily stunned. “Sorry, Sand,” he muttered as he started to run. He sprinted across the desert floor, ignoring the attacks he received and fighting to outrun them.

After a while, he darted behind a sand dune, keeping low to the ground as he weaved throughout the dunes to lose his pursuers. Barely daring to breathe, Dingo inched along the sandy floor and bit his lip to conceal any sound when he heard the dingoes skid to a halt on the other side of the dune he was hiding behind. Their low growls filled the air as they searched for him. Dingo did his best to ignore them as he silently darted away, being sure to stay down so the others wouldn’t see him.

Dingo finally began to relax when their growls died away in the distance. With a sigh, he carefully stood up to ease the strain on his tense muscles and cautiously slunk around the next sand dune. After a slight hesitation, he glanced back and crouched down, pricking his ears and listening for any sound of pursuit. He let out a long, relieved sigh when he



heard nothing then froze when a low voice whispered, “Think you’re safe, Dingo?”

Letting out a terrified gasp, Dingo whirled around. His eyes widened in shock when he saw Bone’s dark, menacing face hovering barely an inch away from his.

Bone smiled a slow, evil smile as he examined Dingo’s stunned expression. “You thought you had gotten away.”

Dingo staggered backward. “I-I did. How did you find me...?”

“I know your game. I just left the others behind and from there, it wasn’t hard.”

Dingo narrowed his eyes. “Well. Looks like you’re smarter than I gave you credit, Bone.”

“Yeah, letting others underestimate you so that you can surprise them and get the upper hand works pretty well.” He had a knowing look.

Dingo began to feel worried because that was one of his tactics. Maybe Bone really did know his game. “I wouldn’t know,” he replied as calmly as he could.

Bone’s eyes flashed. “You should. You’re never what you seem to be.”

“And neither are you,” Dingo retorted. “Look, are we going to get this over with or not? Unlike your great Leader, I really do have things to do.”

“Dagger’s a loser,” Bone agreed with a growl. “He’ll be taken care of soon.”

“I’ll sleep well at night then, especially knowing *you’re* going to be Leader.”

“With any luck, you won’t have too many more nights,” Bone replied. “But for now, go on back to your forest food, Dingo. I won’t stop you.”

Dingo frowned and paused, taken off guard. “What?”

Bone raised an eyebrow. “We’re near the weird forest with all the strange plants and stuff. But I think you know that. You must be here for a reason. Running errands for the forest food, perhaps?”

Dingo glared at him “That’s none of your business.”

Bone shrugged. “Fine, be like that. Either way, I’m going to make sure you don’t come back here. I’m going to make sure you *are* a failure, if

only because you couldn't run errands for forest food. So go on back to your little tiger and tell her you couldn't do whatever it is you set out to do because you're a coward. Meanwhile, I'll be waiting and watching for you around this place. If you show your face again, you die. And then the poor forest food will be left alone to starve."

Dingo closed his eyes for a long moment and let out a long breath of air. "You're sick, you know that?"

Bone grinned. "Well, start walking. And when you get to your forest food, be sure to tell them how you ran away from me and how you're too scared to come back."

"Yeah, we'll see about that," Dingo muttered as he stalked past Bone. He yelped when Bone suddenly clawed at his side and darted away from him, not about to get into a fight when he had been allowed to leave peacefully. He should have guessed Bone wouldn't have let him go unharmed.

Laughter boomed out behind him. "That's right—go cower under a rock, Dingo!" Bone called. "Like always!"

Saderia's eyes widened in shock when Dingo slumped into the den, his sides dripping with blood and his face scarred with fresh wounds. A sharp gasp tore out of her throat as she leapt toward him. He looked up at her with dull light brown eyes when she skidded to a stop in front of him.

Her wide eyes trailed over his tattered body in shock. "What happened?"

Dingo shook his head and looked down with a long sigh. "Nothing," he muttered. "I don't want to talk about it."

Dash looked up from beside the hollowed out rocks, his amber eyes widening in surprise. "Did the dingoes attack you?" he exclaimed.

"Sort of," Dingo muttered, using his tail to flick off a drop of blood.

"What happened?" Saderia repeated, following him to the water-filled rocks. "Did Bone give you those wounds?"

Dingo rolled his eyes. "Who else?" He sighed. "I am so sick of this. Bone's trying to keep me from looking for your family in a specific place. They might actually be there, too, but don't worry about it. I'll find a way to get around Bone. It will just take a few days, that's all. I'm not giving up."

“Don’t get yourself killed for us, not if there’s another way,” Dash exclaimed.

“He’s right! Look at what’s already happened to you,” Saderia added, flicking her tail forward to indicate his wounded side.

“What—this?” Dingo glanced down at the injury and let out a snort. “This is nothing.”

Saderia narrowed her eyes. “Well, what if they do worse?”

“They already have,” Dingo replied, raising an eyebrow. “It’s nothing, really. Don’t worry about me.” He let out a sigh as he flopped down on the ground beside the smooth stone, his eyes squeezing shut. A second later, his head shot up and his eyes opened wide with alarm. “Food!” he exclaimed. “Because of that fight, I forgot all about getting something to eat!” He let out a growl and shook his head bitterly. “Oh well. There’s no way I’m going back out there again. Starving is better than being attacked.”

“There’s water,” Saderia offered quietly.

Dingo looked down. “That’s your water.” Before she could protest, he added, “Trust me, Saderia, one day of starvation isn’t going to kill me. I’ll get something tomorrow...if Bone isn’t around. Maybe I’ll have better luck.”

Saderia watched as he flopped back down onto the ground and winced when she saw sand seep into his bright red wound. Looking down, she let out a soft sigh and slowly crawled onto her stony sleeping place. After a moment’s hesitation, she let her tail droop down and rest comfortably on Dingo’s back. Her amber eyes narrowed with unease as she stared down at her friend and her heart beat faster with fear. She had a bad feeling something horrible was about to happen.

Dingo couldn’t get past Bone the next day, nor the day after, and he couldn’t find any prey either. But such was the life of an outcast and he didn’t let it bother him. On the next day, he made his way back to the area around the strange forest, staying as close to the ground as he possibly could and struggling to keep his belly from growling with hunger. His eyes darted anxiously back and forth as he peeked out over the next sand dune and carefully crept over it, listening intently for a growl to alert him to a dingo’s presence. He looked around nervously, but there was no one in sight. Feeling assured that he was alone, he just barely managed to suppress

a gasp of shock when he snuck to the top of the next sand dune and spotted a splash of orange against the monotonous brown color of sand. His eyes widened in shock as he stared at the figure. Could it be...?

Makero's eyes scanned the desert wearily. His paws dragged against the ground and his tail left lazy trails through the sand. A soft sigh escaped his throat as he looked around. He tried not to wince when the breath of air scraped against his sore, gritty throat. His mind wandered to Saderia and Dash and he unwillingly found himself thinking of them lying dead in the desert somewhere. Shaking his head fiercely, Makero forced himself to continue onward, trying to picture seeing them again and visualizing how happy they would be when he brought them to their new forest home. After a month had passed with no sight of them, however, the thought of seeing his children again was almost unbelievable.

His head drooped as he padded forward, his dull green gaze transfixed on the sand. A feeling of hopelessness coursed through his body like a wave, leaving him feeling weak with exhaustion and numb with despair. Only a miracle would help him find his children now.

As Dingo drew closer, he noticed black stripes lining the orange figure and realized he had been right; it was a tiger. He felt his breath catch in his throat. It had to be Saderia's father. Struggling desperately to remember his name, Dingo finally called out, "Makero!" and winced when his voice echoed loudly through the desert.

Makero's ears pricked up and he whirled around with a hopeful expression that immediately twisted into one of fear when he saw Dingo. His green eyes grew round with terror as he hissed and fluffed out his fur. Bristling threateningly and snarling at Dingo, he took a few steps back, trying not to show how afraid he was.

"No, wait," Dingo exclaimed as he skidded to a halt in front of the frightened tiger. "Don't run. I'm not going to hurt you."

"You're one of those dogs," Makero hissed, narrowing his eyes and unsheathing his claws.

"I am," Dingo replied. "But I'm not like them. I'm not going to attack you. I just want to help you... Is Makero your name?"

Makero glared at him. "How do you know that?"

Dingo's heart beat faster in excitement. "You have a daughter, right? And her name is Saderia?"

Although he was still bristling, Makero's eyes widened and he froze in shock. Hope and fear crossed his face in the same instant. "How do you know my daughter?" he demanded. His commanding tone held a hint of fear, as if he almost didn't want to hear the answer.

"And you have a son named Dash?" When Makero looked even more shocked, Dingo didn't wait for an answer. "They're alive and they're safe," he said rapidly. "They're in my den. But there are dingoes crawling all over this place and we have to get out of here."

Makero's mouth gaped open at the thought of seeing Saderia and Dash again. He hesitated for an agonizingly long moment before shouting, "Take me to them *now*!"

Dingo whirled around and darted back in the direction he had come from, barely pausing to make sure Makero was following him. "This way! Keep low to the ground!" he called, feeling relieved when the tiger obeyed.

As they raced through the desert, their paws kicking up large clouds of sand in their urgency, Makero hissed, "Who are you? Are Saderia and Dash all right? Have you done anything to them? Because if you have, I'll..."

"I'm Dingo. I haven't hurt them. They're safe, Makero...King Makero, I guess it is, right?"

Makero narrowed his eyes. "You know that, too?"

"Saderia told me everything about your forest. I've been trying to keep her and Dash alive and safe. They've been staying in my den for a while and I promised them I'd look for you so that they could be reunited with their family. I've been searching for a while with no luck, but I finally decided to check by the forest to see if you were there." He smiled.

"Thankfully, I guessed right."

"Do you know everything?" Makero asked, stunned.

Dingo grinned. "Hey, this time I *am* the one who knows it all." He paused. "Saderia told me about her Dreams thing, too."

"She must really trust you then," Makero replied, visibly relaxing. He knew that if Saderia could trust someone enough to tell them that momentous secret, he could trust them, too. At the same time, he frowned

and studied Dingo closely. "But why? Why have you been helping them? The other...er, *dingoes* wanted to kill us. Why aren't you the same?"

Dingo sighed. "I'm just not like them. It's hard to explain, but the other dingoes hate me because I'm different. I can't go into the pack's history right now, but long story short...your daughter just reminds me of someone I once knew...my sister."

"Your sister?" Makero asked, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah," he muttered, staring straight ahead and not meeting his gaze. "She...died...was murdered, actually. By my brother. A year ago."

The King's eyes widened in shock. "Why?"

Dingo just shook his head. "We don't have time to go into that right now. Come on, we're almost to my den. I'm surprised we haven't been seen by the pack yet."

Makero nodded and for a while they ran in silence until Makero finally murmured, "You loved your sister."

"More than anything."

"That's why you've been taking care of my children?"

Dingo nodded dully. "I didn't want to see the spirit of my sister die again. It's a good thing I did; I almost went over the edge. Saderia helped me...see what was going on."

"That sounds like Saderia."

Dingo nodded. "She and Dash will be happy to see you. They've been looking for you for a long time."

Suddenly he broke off and carefully brought them to a stop. "Well, we're here," he said as he glanced behind them.

Makero looked around in confusion. "I don't see a den."

"It's hidden."

"You have to hide?"

"It's better than dying." Dingo padded toward a large sand dune and began pawing at the sand on one side of the dune until it fell away to reveal a dark brown stone. He pushed it aside, exposing a hidden den that he leaned into and called, "Saderia! Dash! Come out here!"

In that single moment, Makero felt like he was on fire with hope and longing to see them. After all his searching, all his hoping...after all this time, he was finally going to see his children again...

Saderia and Dash looked up from the hollowed out rocks at the sound of Dingo's loud, excited voice. Their eyes opened wide with surprise and they exchanged a quick, confused glance before cautiously shuffling toward the entrance. Peeking out into the desert around them, they blinked rapidly against the sudden, blinding glare of the sun. Stumbling outside, Saderia squinted her eyes and let out a gasp when she saw a familiar orange tiger standing just a few paces away. Her mouth gaped open in shock as Dingo stepped off to the side and she met the burning green gaze of Makero.

"Dad?" she whispered.

"Makero?" Dash gasped as he staggered up beside her.

Makero's green eyes stretched wide with disbelief. "Saderia?" he whispered. "Dash?"

Saderia let out a gasp. "Dad!" Her paws slammed against the ground as she darted toward him, her amber eyes wide with shock. She let out a cry of hope as she lunged toward her father and sent them both stumbling to the ground. Her eyes squeezed shut with hope and relief as she staggered to her paws and pressed her muzzle into her father's white chest. Her tail flicked happily back and forth when Makero wrapped his paw around her back and patted her gently. She looked up and smiled in relief when she saw his beaming face staring down at her.

She turned and looked back as Dash skidded to a halt behind her, standing just a few inches away from them. Makero beckoned him forward with his tail and gave him a relieved pat on the back, his green eyes warm and kind.

"I'm so glad to see you two," he whispered, his voice cracking with emotion. "I thought I'd never see you again." He looked them over carefully. "Are you okay?"

Saderia nodded briskly. "We're fine, Dad. Dingo's been taking care of us."

"Are *you* okay?" Dash added, glancing up at the King in worry. He glanced back at Dingo then looked back to Makero curiously. "Did he..."

"Yes, your friend found me," Makero answered. "And I'm perfectly fine now that I've found you two."

Saderia beamed. Her voice shook as she whispered, “We’re so happy to see you, Dad. We were terrified we would never see you or Mom ever again.”

“I was worried, too,” Makero murmured, patting Saderia’s sandy back with his tail. “I thought you two were gone forever, what with the dogs and everything...but you survived.” He smiled at them then looked past them at Dingo, who was standing just a few feet behind them. The canine’s ears pricked up as Makero called, “Thank you so much for bringing me here.”

Dingo just nodded and glanced back down, watching them curiously out of the corner of his eye. Makero glanced down at Saderia and Dash and smiled, his heart beating rapidly in his chest as he hissed, “We’ve found a new forest.” Saderia and Dash gaped at him in shock as he continued, “We have a new home. I know the way back and I can bring you to our new house now. Your mother and aunt and uncle are there and so are all the other forest animals. We’ll be together again.”

Saderia gasped with hope, but before she could give life to any of the excited words building at the back of her mind, she was interrupted by a low, gruff growl. Her eyes widened and her blood ran cold as a snarl echoed through the desert.

“Hate to interrupt,” said Bone. “But Dingo and I have a score to settle.”



# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Final Fight

Saderia, Dash, Dingo, and Makero whirled around at the sound of the dark, sneering voice. Makero put himself protectively in front of Saderia and Dash, who stepped out from behind him anyway to see what was going on. Dingo's light brown eyes grew wide with fear and shock when he saw Bone sitting at the base of the sand dune just a few feet away. A second later, more dingoes appeared and stood at the top of the sand dune. Dingo recognized Rock, Rip, Tear, Dagger, and Sand, as well as three other dingoes.

"Bone, what are you doing here?" Dingo demanded. To his credit, his voice was even and didn't sound intimidated.

"We have a score to settle," Bone repeated. Stepping closer so that he was less than an inch away from Dingo, he growled, "I saw you with that piece of forest food." He gestured to Makero. "I thought about attacking you, but I let you get away so you would lead me to your den where you're keeping all the forest food."

"So what now?" Dingo replied.

Even though Dingo remained calm and undaunted, Saderia's eyes widened in horror. Bone knew where Dingo lived now, so he could come back anytime he wanted to hurt him or even kill him. Dingo *had* to come live with them now.

Saderia swallowed hard as she stared nervously at the two brothers. She had a bad feeling about what might be about to happen. Why were all of those other dingoes standing at the top of the sand dune?

"We fight," Bone growled in response to Dingo's question. He let out a dry chuckle. "I don't know about you, but I'm getting sick of this 'I chase you, you run and hide' nonsense. What do you think?"

"I couldn't agree more," Dingo growled. "But you know how you could put an end to that? By leaving me alone. I have never done anything to you."

“That doesn’t matter. You know I won’t be happy until you’re dead.” He grinned. “I think I’ve tortured you enough, so now I can finally kill you.”

“Oh, great,” Dingo growled. “Get out of here, Bone. We’re not fighting.”

“Oh, yes we are. To the death, as in I live and you die.” Bone gave him a cold sneer. “Come on, Dingo, you know I’m not going to give up until you’re dead. I’ll kill the forest food and everyone else just to make you suffer. You should get this over with.”

“Even if I’m dead, you’ll still go after them,” Dingo murmured.

“Maybe I will and maybe I won’t. Didn’t they just say they live in a new forest or something? The weird one? I don’t go near that place.”

Dingo didn’t say anything as Bone went on, “If you die, I’ll leave them alone. What do you think, Dingo?”

Saderia looked at him with pleading eyes, begging him not to give into Bone and give up, after all he’d done. Bone was lying; Dingo must know that! As soon as Bone was done with Dingo, he would go after her and Dash. Why else would he have so many dingoes with him? She stared at her friend with wide eyes, feeling her heart skip with unease when she saw his dark, lifeless gaze.

Dingo was silent for a long time. His gaze locked on his paws. Finally he looked up with a weary expression. “No, I think I know something that’ll work better.”

“Like what?” Bone growled. His amber eyes narrowed with hatred.

Dingo sighed and slowly pulled himself to his paws. “Why don’t I show you rather than tell you?”

Bone’s eyes widened in shock then narrowed as a cruel sneer spread across his face. He let out a dark chuckle and leapt to his paws. “You think you can kill me,” he mocked.

“Isn’t that what you came here for? A fight to the death? As in one of us has to kill the other?” Dingo’s eyes were dark and emotionless. He already knew that it would never end, that Bone would always try to find new ways to torture him. He knew he would go after Saderia and Dash whether Dingo was dead or not just to prove his point and to get revenge for all the times they had eluded him. Dingo didn’t know if he could win this

fight or not, but even if he didn't win, it might just be enough to give the forest animals time to escape. It might be enough to save them.

Bone grinned. "Sure. I think it's about time we ended this."

"It is," Dingo agreed sadly. "Look, Bone, I gave you a million chances and you never gave me *one*. I tried not to believe the worst of you and I tried to get along with you, but it never worked. You just kept trying to destroy me. I let myself believe what you were saying and I'm sick of that. I can't do that anymore." He shook his head. "You crossed the line. You crossed it a year ago when you killed Claw, but I didn't let myself believe it until now. I'm not going to let you hurt anyone else."

"Such big talk for such a cowardly dingo," Bone snickered.

"I'm not a coward anymore. I'm done with this. Now stop stalling."

Bone raised an eyebrow. "You're the one who's stalling."

"Fine. Let's fight then," Dingo sighed, still in that tired, long-suffering tone of voice.

Bone leered at him. "Let's end this."

Before Dingo could prepare, Bone leapt at him with a vicious snarl, his eyes glinting with hate and excitement. Dingo narrowly dodged to the side and ducked under a blow when Bone turned around to face him. He raised a paw to strike back, but Bone caught it and twisted it before slamming into Dingo's side and shoving him to the ground. A loud howl of pain tore out of Dingo's throat as he struggled to pick himself up. He flashed his claws across Bone's face before leaping to his paws and darting away from him, a low growl bursting from his chest.

"Dingo," Saderia whimpered.

"He'll be okay, right?" Dash whispered, shooting her a nervous glance.

Saderia didn't reply. "*Please* be okay," she whispered as she fought to keep tears from pricking her eyes.

An earsplitting snarl split the air as Dingo and Bone raced toward each other, leaping into the air and letting out growls of fury when their paws collided. Dingo let out a gasp when they crashed to the ground and squeezed his eyes shut as pain shot up his spine. Bone's claws dug into his shoulders, pinning him to the ground. As his eyes flicked open, he caught a glimpse of Bone's dark, stormy face before he ripped his paws free and raked his claws across Bone's muzzle. With a yelp of pain, Bone jumped

back, giving Dingo just enough time to wriggle out from underneath him and leap to his paws.

Dingo turned to race away, trying to ignore the awful stinging in his spine, but Bone grabbed his leg and dragged him back, forcing him to stumble to the ground. With a strangled howl of pain, Dingo twisted himself free and darted away before Bone could break his leg. He whirled around and leapt onto Bone's back to push him down, but Bone reared back, bit down on Dingo's front paw, and threw him away from him. Blood spattered the ground. Dingo winced as he picked himself painfully off the ground, trying to ignore the blood welling up in the wound on his leg.

Bone jumped on him before he even had his footing. With a snarl of anger, the two of them went rolling to the ground, their eyes gleaming with hatred as they fought to bite each other's throats. Dingo's light brown eyes blazed with rage as he dug his claws deep into Bone's legs. Bone's furious snarl filled the thick, blood-scented air as he struggled to push him down. With a low growl, Dingo buried his fangs into Bone's shoulder as the dark dingo threw him against the ground. He let out a yelp when Bone shoved him away, snapping Dingo's neck against the sandy desert floor. When Dingo dared to open his eyes, he found himself staring up into Bone's furious face. His amber eyes glinted with hatred and disgust. Deep pants shuddered out of their throats as their eyes met and a lifetime of spite and animosity seemed to pass between them.

Bone grinned humorlessly. "I've known you way too long."

With a murderous snarl, he lunged for Dingo's throat. Dingo let out a howl of pain as Bone's fangs tore into his skin. Narrowing his eyes with a feral snarl, Dingo kicked his hind paws into Bone's belly and forced his brother to rear back, tearing his fangs out of Dingo's flesh and letting out a hiss of pain through gory, gritted teeth. Before Bone could retaliate, Dingo raked his claws across his face and shoved him to the side. Staggering to his paws, Dingo lunged toward Bone to try to pin him while he was down, then let out a yelp of pain when Bone's claws reached out and flashed across his face.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Dingo stumbled blindly backwards, his face stinging with pain. He opened his eyes just in time to see Bone lunge toward him. Dingo whirled around and raked his claws across his face, panting as Bone staggered away from him. The dark dingo looked up, his

amber eyes glistening with rage as scarlet blood trickled down his face. With a howl of fury, he raced toward Dingo at the same time Dingo lunged toward him, their paws crashing together when they collided and collapsed on the ground. Before Dingo could draw back, Bone dug his claws into Dingo's paw and twisted it as hard as he could.

Dingo howled in agony and leapt away from him, his paw throbbing with pain. He gritted his teeth and struggled to stand, barely noticing the pain nor the blood sticking to his fur and dripping from his deep, stinging wounds. Letting out a furious snarl, he raced toward Bone and leapt into the air. Bone prepared to intercept him and throw him away, but at the last moment, Dingo dropped to the ground just a few inches short of where Bone was standing. Before Bone could react, Dingo swiped his paws out from under him as fast as he could and rammed into him when he stumbled to the side.

Bone let out a howl as he crashed to the ground and winced when his paw twisted at an awkward, painful angle. Dingo didn't waste time. Before Bone could try to pick himself up, Dingo leapt onto his belly and forced him down, a dangerous growl rising in his throat when Bone's flaming amber eyes met his.

"How's it feel to be the loser?" he taunted. "For once?" Despite everything Bone had done to him, Dingo actually felt bad for mocking him. He desperately tried to push the feeling away.

"You won't kill me, Dingo," Bone snarled. "This is just luck. You haven't won."

Dingo narrowed his eyes. "What makes you think I won't kill you?"

Bone snickered. "I know you. You won't kill me. That would make you *just like me*."

Dingo froze, his eyes widening with shock and guilt. He immediately drew back and stared down at his brother in horror. He couldn't do this; it wasn't right. If he killed Bone, he would be just like the other dingoes. Maybe even worse. Bone was his brother, after all, and he was right; Dingo couldn't kill him. Which meant Bone would win.

Dingo's ears drooped and his eyes narrowed in defeat. Bone's eyes gleamed when he realized Dingo wasn't going to do anything; he knew he had won. Dingo sighed inwardly as he started to let Bone up. His head drooped as he backed away and his eyes closed in defeat as he slowly

padded away from his enemy. He looked up slowly and suddenly let out a gasp when he saw his brother's amber eyes dart toward Saderia and Dash and take on a cold, sadistic glint. Saderia and Dash were too busy looking at Dingo to notice the evil look and Dingo realized with a gasp of horror what Bone's final plan to destroy him was: kill Saderia and Dash before he killed him.

"No!" he shouted. He felt his breath leave him when Bone threw him aside and he stumbled painfully to the ground, too late to stop him.

With a terrified snarl, Dingo forced himself to his paws, his heart pounding with fear and determination. Hearing the sound of a low growl, Dingo whirled around just in time to see Bone charge toward Saderia and Dash, licking his lips as if he could already taste their blood. A savage snarl tore out of his throat as he raced after Bone, ignoring the searing pain of his wounds. With a loud howl of fury, Dingo lunged forward and landed in front of Bone, bringing him to a dead halt.

Dingo's light brown eyes narrowed with hatred and a low growl rumbled in his throat. "Leave them alone."

"Are you going to stop me?" Bone scoffed.

"Yeah," Dingo growled. "Forget it, I know your game, Bone. I'm not listening to you anymore. All you ever do is get me to believe lies."

Bone's eyes flashed. "Fine, have it your way."

He let out a growl, bunching his muscles to attack, but before he could move, Dingo lunged at him with a loud, enraged howl. Bone let out a sharp yelp as he fell backward, just barely managing to catch himself and shove him back before darting away to avoid Dingo's attack. Dingo chased after him and raked his claws across his forehead when Bone whirled around to face him. Bone tore at him with his claws, trying to force him down to finish him off, but Dingo fought back fiercely and didn't even wince when blood trickled down his face and gushed out of his chest. The only thing that mattered was ending this and making sure Saderia and Dash would be safe.

Bone stumbled away and Dingo followed. Bone let out a snarl and leapt onto his back, but Dingo reared back on his hind legs and threw him off before Bone could sink his claws in deeper. He rounded on him as Bone landed heavily on the ground, his mouth opening in a silent, painful howl.

Dingo growled. "I'll make you pay, Bone. I'll make you *pay*. You're not killing anyone else."

Groaning, Bone tried to pick himself up off the ground, but Dingo yanked one paw out from under him so that he fell back down. Dingo tried to pin him down, but Bone raked his claws across his face and jumped to his paws when Dingo drew back, ignoring the gash Dingo's claws left in his leg. Bone backed away while Dingo advanced toward him, both snapping and clawing at the other as they fell back.

"When did you get so tough?" Bone demanded; there was a tiny hint of fear in his voice.

"When you killed Claw," Dingo growled. "When you made me fight for every second of a life I didn't want to live." His attacks became more brutal until he had Bone backed up against a sand dune. Bone tried to leap away, but Dingo jumped and threw him to the ground, trapping his paws when he struggled to get away. "Is that clear enough?"

Bone opened his mouth to say something, but Dingo slapped his paw roughly over his muzzle before he could speak. "Stop talking," he snarled. "I'm tired of hearing your stupid voice telling me what a loser I am, and that I killed Claw, and that I deserve to die. I'm not listening to your lies anymore."

Bone struggled to break free of his grasp, but Dingo just dug his claws in deeper. "You think I won't kill you, but you're an idiot," he whispered. "After what you've done to me and the ones I care about, I *will* kill you. I'm not letting you hurt Saderia and Dash!"

Everything was still except for Bone's desperate struggles.

Dingo's voice rose as he spoke. "It's over, Bone. This is the way you and the pack wanted me to be, right? You wanted me to be evil, cruel, and a murderer! You wanted me to stop being different and be as cold as the rest of you! Well, now I am, and you're not looking too happy about it!" He let out a humorless laugh. "I'm going to win just this once! And I can see the fear in your eyes, Bone, so you know it's over, too. You shouldn't have done what you did and messed with me. And guess what else?"

Dingo dug his claws into his shoulders and clamped his paw over Bone's mouth when he tried to yelp. Bone tried to bite him to get him to jump back, but Dingo didn't even flinch when blood streamed over Bone's muzzle.

With a low, dark snarl, he leaned down close to Bone's face and whispered, "This... is... for... Claw."

In an instant, he lunged forward and sank his fangs deep into Bone's throat, closing his eyes when his fangs broke his skin and thick, salty blood seeped into his mouth. Bone's amber eyes widened in horror as a strangled howl of terror burst from his bloody throat. His struggles became frantic and desperate as he fought to get away. Soon his wild thrashing became more lethargic and weak until his paws fell limply to his sides and his panicked, pain-filled howl cut off in a sick gurgle of blood. His eyes grew dull and lifeless as his head slumped back against the ground, his mouth gaped open in a silent cry of pain. Only then did Dingo tear his fangs out of Bone's throat and step away from his body.

Everything was still and silent. Dingo slowly looked at the dead body of his brother and winced when his eyes trailed over his mangled form. Bone's amber eyes were glazed over with pain and fear, scars covered his sides, and blood trickled down his face, soaking into his cold dark brown fur. Dingo closed his eyes and turned away from Bone's dull, sightless stare, knowing that horrible empty gaze would haunt him for the rest of his life. He shook his head and tried to fight the grief that overwhelmed the anger. He couldn't afford to let himself think about what he had done. Hesitantly, he opened his eyes and swung around to face Saderia and Dash.

Saderia stared at him for a long moment, her eyes following the blood dripping from his fangs. Her body went suddenly numb with relief when she realized that it was over, that Dingo had finally won. Her eyes closed and she let out a long, quiet sigh, her tense muscles slowly beginning to relax. She looked up at Dingo and suddenly winced when she saw the pain in his expression and the grief in his dull brown eyes. Her heart twisted with pain when she sensed the anguish written in every line of his face; she wanted to say something to him, but she didn't know what to say.

Dingo stared at them for a long moment then miserably looked away, his eyes closing with guilt. "I'm sorry," he choked out. Saderia knew he wasn't apologizing to them.

Opening his dark brown eyes, Dingo slowly turned to look at the dogs standing at the top of the sand dune; every one of them looked stunned. Rip's mouth was hanging open in shock and his yellow eyes were



wide with horror and disbelief. Tear's expression was a mirror of his. Rock's dark brown eyes were round with disbelief, but that was it. Dingo could see only anger and disgust in his dark brown gaze and not even a hint of sadness that his best friend was dead.

Dingo looked away from Rock's dark stare then froze when he looked up and caught sight of Dagger's furious glare. In the icy yellow glare of the pack Leader, Dingo saw nothing but fury and his own death. His wide eyes met his father's, their shadowed brown depths darkening with acceptance and resignation as he slowly nodded his head. Dagger's enraged, pitiless eyes narrowed as he watched his son turn away from him.

Dingo's eyes found Saderia's. "Run," he told her. "Right now. Makero, you take them back to the forest. Use the route we took to get here. All the dingoes that were out in the desert are here and won't be a threat to you if you leave right now. I'll catch up with you," he added lamely, knowing it was a lie.

"But..." Saderia began.

Dingo shook his head before she could finish. "No, go now. Makero," he added, glancing gravely at their father.

Makero gave Dingo a long look then turned to Saderia and Dash. "We have to go."

"But what about Dingo?" Saderia asked.

"Don't worry about me," Dingo growled.

Saderia and Dash still looked uncertain, but after giving Dingo one last questioning glance, they slowly began to follow when Makero led them away. Saderia's fearful amber gaze lingered on Dingo's face for what seemed like ages before she finally turned to keep up with her father.

Dingo watched them go with a cold, detached expression. He knew the pack members wouldn't notice them leaving. The forest animals were nothing to them, not like they were to Bone; the pack would be too focused on the murderer of their Second in Command to care about them.

Once Saderia, Dash, and Makero safely disappeared behind a sand dune, Dingo turned to his father, Dagger, the apathetic Leader of the pack. He managed a hoarse, humorless laugh. "Well, Dagger, I bet this puts quite a kink in your plan. Looks like your favorite son won't take your place, after all."

“You worthless, despicable...” Dagger broke off in a vicious growl, his yellow eyes blazing with anger. “Kill him!”

Dingo stood resignedly still, his dull brown eyes blank and his body numb as he watched the dingoes slowly start to race toward him, their stunned expressions darkening as they let out loud, enraged howls. When they were about halfway to him, Dingo turned around, cast one look back, then took off running mere seconds before they attacked. The pack was fast on his paws.

Running as fast as he could, Dingo led the pack members far away from Saderia and Dash, all the while trying to outrun them and escape. His aching, bleeding legs carried him swiftly across the desert floor and slowly he began to lose them. As he ran, he found himself starting to hope that he might be able to live another day...until he heard a low growl from behind him. Dingo glanced over his shoulder just in time to see a flash of red lunge past him. Whirling around to look ahead, Dingo let out a gasp when he saw Rip turn around to face him with wide, stunned yellow eyes. Dingo's paws slammed against the ground, leaving deep trails through the sand as he skidded to an abrupt halt, his eyes frantic and alarmed. He tried to get around Rip, but his brother blocked him.

“Rip, stop this,” Dingo pleaded. “Let me go.”

Indecision darkened Rip's horrified gaze, but he still blocked Dingo's way. “You're a murderer,” he whispered. Confusion and deep betrayal clouded his wide yellow eyes.

“Please, Rip,” Dingo begged. “You don't understand.”

But by then it was too late and the other dingoes had surrounded him.

“You killed our brother,” Rip murmured, his eyes dazed and distressed.

Dingo's eyes widened as the others closed in on him and his eyes locked with his brother's. Rip's lost, soulless gaze was the last thing Dingo saw before the pack members jumped on him.

The dingoes tore into him and he let out a howl of pain. The pack members let out dark, hateful snarls as they fought to be the one to kill him. Dingo tried to fight them off, but there were too many and he was already weakened from the fight with Bone. His eyes grew dull with resignation as he faced his fate, knowing death was creeping closer every second and

wondering if he would finally get to see Claw again. He already knew there was no way of getting out alive.

Unless they still believed he was as weak as they had always thought, he realized. His eyes opened wide with hope as desperate thoughts flickered through his mind. Unless they thought he would go down quickly. His heart beat faster with fear and hope. He had one last chance. Even if it was a long shot, he still had a chance. With a perfectly staged howl of pain, Dingo fell limply to the ground and didn't move. As the howls and snarls echoed around them, he closed his eyes and hoped that wherever he ended up, the spirit of the one he had loved so much would soon be with him.

Saderia's paws skidded to a halt and she whipped around, sending sand billowing out all around her. Her eyes stretched wide with horror when a loud, painful howl echoed through the desert. Her mouth gaped open in shock and a sharp gasp tore out of her throat. Somewhere around her she heard Claw's voice scream, "No!" Her heart stopped in her chest as if frozen in horror as the howl slowly died away.

"Dingo!" Dash shouted as he slammed to a stop beside her.

"No!" Saderia screamed. Her heart skipped back to life and began racing frantically in her chest. Before Dash or Makero could stop her, she darted forward and leapt to the top of a sand dune. A scream tore out of her throat when she looked down on the desert. Her mind whirled and the scene blurred before her eyes when she found herself staring down at a bloody, broken body lying face down in the sand several yards away.

"Dingo!" she shrieked. She shoved her paws against the sand to rush toward him, but before she could move, someone grabbed her from behind and pulled her back. Letting out a shriek of protest, she whirled around and found herself staring into Makero's wide green eyes.

"Saderia," he growled. "Don't."

"But..."

"Don't," he repeated sternly, his green eyes narrowing and boring into hers. "You'll be killed."

Saderia's eyes stretched wide with disbelief. Turning around, her whole body went numb with dismay when she saw the dingoes slowly start to step away from Dingo's body and walk away. Her heart slowed and her eyes widened in horror as Makero's words echoed in her mind. *Killed...*

“Saderia.” She whirled around and found herself staring up at Makero’s dark, pained expression. “We have to go.”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head frantically. “No,” she stammered. “Dingo...”

“We have to *go*,” Makero repeated sternly.

Saderia stared at him in horror. Her head jerked to the side when she heard footsteps and found herself staring into the wide amber eyes of Dash. He stared back at her, his paws seeming to shake with shock and fear. Glancing up at Makero, he seemed to take a deep breath before looking back at Saderia.

“He’s right,” he whispered, trying to keep the shakiness out of his voice. “We...we have to leave. There’s nothing we can do now.”

Her eyes grew wide with shock. “No,” she gasped. “He...we can’t...we...”

“Saderia.” She turned and stared back at her father. “Come on,” Makero growled. “Let’s get out of there before they catch us.” He looked up and beckoned for Dash to follow, murmuring, “Come on, Dash.”

Dash numbly stumbled forward, casting a shocked glance back at the sand dunes behind him. Saderia’s eyes went wild with shock, but before she could protest, she felt her father pull on her paw. Stumbling forward, Saderia struggled to fight back, but no matter how much she tried, her father kept pulling her onward, coaxing her forward with a look of grief and sorrow.

“No!” she cried, struggling to fight him off. “I have to save Dingo!”

Dash looked back at her with wide, lifeless eyes as if he could hardly believe what had happened. His paws stumbled clumsily along the sandy floor and his legs shook with shock. It seemed to take every bit of his strength just to keep moving beside Makero and his gaze never left Saderia’s. Saderia stared back at him in horror, shaking her head frantically and trying to keep tears from stinging her eyes. Stumbling forward, she tried to fight off Makero’s strong grip until she finally staggered forward and plummeted into the sand, squeezing her eyes shut.

Her body felt numb with pain as Makero carefully helped her up, wrapping his tail tightly around hers for comfort. Saderia stumbled numbly forward; the desert around her was a blur of confusion, shock, and tears as she turned to look back. Her heart leapt as she strained her ears, listening

desperately for any growl or yelp or bark, anything that would give her a reason to go back, to help, but it was no use. The desert was silent.

Saderia hung her head and forced herself to move onward. The silence seemed to drown out her frenzied thoughts. Her tail swept against the ground, making a trail up the side of a sand dune as she padded lifelessly alongside her father and her best friend. When she reached the top, she took one look back and let out a sigh.

She forced herself to look forward as the sand dunes rose up behind her and her last glimpse of Dingo disappeared into the endless yellow brown sand.



**Sarah Renée** has loved writing from an early age. She has been writing short stories since the age of four, and at the age of ten, she came up with the idea for The Tiger Princess. She wrote the novel when she was twelve. She is fascinated with wild animals and the wild world outside her home, and has an obvious great love of tigers. She enjoys spending time with her cats, reading, drawing, and playing her violin when she is not writing. In her free time, she is constantly daydreaming about her many characters, creating new ones, and coming up with interesting adventure story ideas. She is fourteen years old.

Visit [www.thetigerprincess.com](http://www.thetigerprincess.com) to learn more about Sarah Renée, her books, and more!

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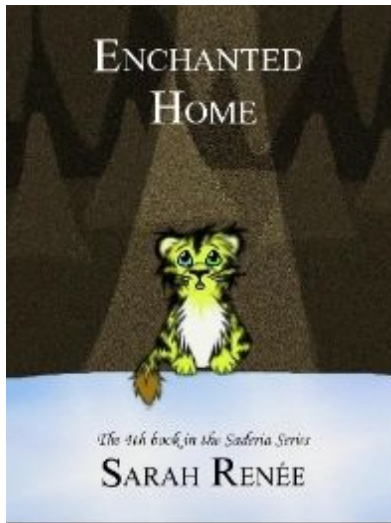
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# Saderia Series Book 4:

## Enchanted Home



*One year ago, a fire destroyed a mysterious forest.  
A young animal was framed by the Emperor himself.  
Living as an outlaw, he struggles to uncover the real story...*

Jeb is a kind but fearful creature. Living in an underground Spring with only a mysterious outlaw named Secka to protect him, Jeb struggles to uncover the truth about the fire he was framed for.

Meanwhile, Saderia finds herself in a strange forest. An unknown enemy is sabotaging the kingdom. While trying to save the others, Saderia finds herself wishing Dingo was there. But is Dingo truly gone? And when her best friend finds himself seconds away from death, will Saderia be able to trust her instincts to save him?

Check out [Enchanted Home](#) on Amazon, or read an excerpt on the next page!



# Enchanted Home

## Chapter One

Outlaw

Two furious pale gray and vibrant green eyes bored into Jeb's fur from across an endless expanse of darkness. A low, threatening growl rumbled in the distance, sending shivers racing up his spine. Somewhere in the background, hidden behind the blackness surrounding him, he could hear the sinister crackle of flame growing louder and louder. Terror burned in his heart when the loud rumble of the fire roared in his ears. A wave of intense heat washed over him, dragging him down to the ground.

Flickers of bright red and orange flames leapt up through the darkness around him. A memory of the flames leaping up a tall tree and charring the bright purple leaves into ashes faded into an image of the roaring blaze racing across a long strip of pale green grass. The flames flickered higher and higher, covering trees and bushes and sending a billowing cloud of smoke rising into the cloudless blue sky. Screams echoed around him as the memories of the flames suddenly disappeared into darkness.

The light, mocking sound of giggling slowly pierced through the silence around him, making his heart burn with pain. Two scornful bright green eyes shone through the blackness, meeting his sad gaze and never seeming to blink. Gray and green eyes appeared less than a second later. A sharp, furious snarl echoed through the blackness.

"Get out of my Empire!"

Jeb's eyes flew open and he shot upward into a sitting position, letting out a terrified gasp and looking around wildly. Frightened pants and gasps shuddered out of his chest and his bright blue and green eyes opened wide in terror. Struggling to calm the frantic beating of his heart and take

deeper, slower breaths, he stared at the den around him and tried to push memories of the nightmare away.

Bleak gray walls made of rock rose up around him, curving upward to form a rocky ceiling above him. Shadows fell across the sharp, jutting edges of the stone, sending shivers of fear down his spine. Damp green mold crept across the hard, rocky floor beneath him. The cave den was completely empty apart from a tiny pile of fruit left in the corner. Flies buzzed around the measly leftovers, picking it apart piece by piece.

Taking a deep breath, Jeb slowly pushed himself up, trying not to let his paws shake against the rough, freezing floor. He glanced down at his bright yellow and black-striped fur, searching for any sign of wounds or injuries in case the dream was real. Looking back, he flicked his brown-tufted tail into view before glancing down and spreading out the green webbing between his yellow paws. A soft, shaky sigh breathed out of his chest when he realized he hadn't been hurt.

Jeb shivered when he looked around the cave den and realized his father was nowhere in sight. Casting an anxious glance around the den, he tried to shake off the cold fear that lingered after the dream and padded cautiously to the gaping entrance of his den. He nervously peeked out into the Spring, searching for any sign of his father.

Rocky walls rose up on the opposite side of the underground Spring and covered the back and front walls, closing in a huge open space. The cold stone floor stretched out in front of him, leading to the back of the Spring that sat just a few feet to the right of his den. Hundreds of jagged holes had been carved into the side of the wall, marking the entrances to the dens of the other kraguers and tunnels that led back to even more dens. A bright, sparkling pool of shimmering, crystal-like water glimmered in a deep basin just a few paces to the left of his den. The brilliant blue waters lapped at the stony floor of the underground, dampening the pale green mold and moss growing on the very edges of the spring. A faint beam of moonlight shimmered down into the Spring from a tiny hole carved into the top of the underground cavern, illuminating the bright Spring water and casting dark shadows across the back of the cave. The outlaws living down in the Spring sat against the rocky walls, giving him dark, eerie glances.

Stumbling nervously out into the main part of the Spring, Jeb headed toward the pool of water and paused when he spotted another

kraguer racing toward him.

Telku skidded to a stop and frowned at him. "What are you doing out here?"

Jeb avoided his father's worried gaze and shrugged. "I was looking for you."

Telku let out a sigh. "You should have stayed in the den. It's dangerous out here."

Jeb flattened his ears. He tried to take in a shaky breath of the damp, musty air of the Spring and his eyes narrowed with pain. "Why did Zerone have to force us to live here? We don't deserve to live with these evil kraguers! We're not criminals like them!"

Telku sighed. "Save the speech, Jeben. There's nothing we can do about it now."

Jeb narrowed his eyes and muttered under his breath. "I hate Zerone!"

Telku let out a long breath of air and rested his brown-tufted tail gently on Jeb's shoulder to reassure him. "Let's not dwell on this. We should get back to our cave den."

Jeb nodded weakly and started to turn around to pad back to his den, then froze at the sound of a light, familiar voice. "Telku! Jeb!"

The two of them whirled around to see where the voice had come from and smiled weakly when they saw who it was. Jeb's mother leapt down from the hole at the top of the underground Spring and landed neatly on the tiny strip of stony ground that sat on the other side of the pool of water. Her blue and gray eyes glimmered in the darkness, and the faint glow of moonlight from the hole leading to the upper world illuminated her yellow and black-striped fur. She had several pieces of fruit clasped tightly in her jaws.

Jeb's blue and green eyes lit up with a tiny glimmer of hope, but he froze when a sharp hiss echoed through the Spring. A kraguer with a cold smirk stepped out from behind the shadows just a few paces away from Jeb's mother and let out a chuckle. The faint light shone down on the outlaw, making Jeb shiver when he recognized the pale blue eyes of Citcha, an outlaw who had been exiled for ridiculous amounts of thievery. A crooked sneer spread across her face when she sauntered over to Jeb's mother.

“Hand that over, Jati!” she snarled, flicking her brown-tipped tail.

Jati hissed and narrowed her eyes. “This is ours!”

Citcha snickered. “Not anymore.” Lunging forward, she rammed into Jati and sent her stumbling toward the pool of water.

Jati let out a cry of shock, sending the food tumbling to the ground. Before she could stop herself, she fell backwards into the spring water with a loud splash. Water splattered the stony ground and drenched Citcha’s face, but she barely seemed to notice.

“Citcha!” Telku let out a growl of fury, but the thief ignored him and grabbed the fruit, letting out a wild, crazed laugh and racing back to her cave den with her tail streaming out behind her. Before any of them could stop her, she lunged toward one of the jagged alcoves at the back of the underground and disappeared into the blackness.

Jeb’s eyes widened in alarm and he staggered to the edge of the spring. “Mom!”

His heart skipped in his chest, but before he could panic, his mother poked her head up out of the water, gasping for air. Her blue and gray eyes glinted with fury and annoyance and she spat into the water. “Citcha,” she muttered, paddling swiftly through the pool of water and stretching out the green webbing between her toes. “Always causing trouble!” Letting out a low growl, she swam to the side of the spring and hauled herself up onto the stone beside Telku and Jeb, dripping with water and scowling in frustration.

Telku let out a long sigh. “There’s nothing you can do, Jati. Come on now, let’s go back to our den. I think we still have some leftovers from last night.”

Jati crinkled her nose. “I hate leftovers. The flies have probably gotten to them.”

Jeb shuddered, but when his parents slowly began padding back to their den, he reluctantly fell into step behind them. He grimaced when he crept into their den to see flies circling the leftovers and filling the den with an annoying buzzing sound.

Jati curled her lip and turned away from it. “Gross!”

Telku sighed and lowered himself down onto a clump of mold. “Just get over it.”

Jeb’s mother glared at him and gritted her teeth. “You two just had to go and get involved in Zerone’s dirty business, didn’t you? If it wasn’t

for you two, he wouldn't have exiled us to this place and we wouldn't be living around the filth of the Empire!"

Jeb narrowed his eyes and felt a sting of pain. "Hey, that's not true!"

Telku gritted his teeth. "He's right. We're here because of Zerone's doing, not ours. Maybe if we had a less selfish Emperor, we wouldn't be here. How about that?"

"Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time," she muttered, flopping down on the hard ground. "You should have left Zerone to deal with his own fire."

"I'm sorry," Jeb muttered, looking hurtfully down at his paws.

Telku flicked his tail sharply. "Don't be. Our coming here was Zerone's fault."

Jeb let out a soft sigh. "Mom's got a point, though."

His father narrowed his eyes, his green irises gleaming in the dim light. "So we should be punished for trying to help someone?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "Apparently that's how Zerone sees it. Look, I hate him as much as you or anyone, but he was kind of in a bad situation."

"That was his own doing." Telku flattened his ears and lashed his tail. "If he hadn't started the fire in the first place..."

Jati glared at him. "If *you* hadn't gone out in the fire in the first place, *then* we would be fine. If you had stayed where you were supposed to instead of getting involved in other animal's business like you always do, we wouldn't be in this disgusting place."

Telku gritted his teeth. "If you're going to keep blaming us..."

"If you're going to keep doing stupid things..."

"Stop fighting!" Jeb cut off his mother with a sharp cry, his eyes wide with alarm. "I hate it when you fight, and you're *always* doing it!" He shrank back when his parents whirled around to stare at him in shock and tried to avoid their stunned gazes. His fur prickled with unease and distress. Fights seemed to erupt constantly about that stupid fire and the Emperor's decision to exile them ever since they had come to the Spring. Most of the time, he tried to take both of their sides and get them to compromise, but it rarely worked and he hated that he could never stop them from getting angry at each other.

A long silence spread out between them before Telku finally hung his head and let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Jeb."

Jati rolled her eyes and glanced guiltily at the ground. "Sorry," she muttered.

Casting an annoyed glance at Jati, Telku took a deep breath and gave Jeb a weak smile. "Why don't you get some water from the spring? I think the others are gone now."

Jeb glanced uneasily back and forth between his parents. After a long hesitation, he turned around to peek out through the entrance to his den and gazed around at the underground. A relieved sigh breathed out of his throat when he realized the shadowed Spring was empty of any outlaws. Taking a cautious step forward and trying to ignore his fear, he stumbled over to the spring and crouched down on the fuzzy moss growing along the edges of the basin. After looking nervously over both shoulders, he slowly bent down and lapped up a few drops of the shimmering water, feeling grateful that the Spring held one of the only pools in the entire forest that wasn't poisoned. Closing his eyes, he tried to enjoy the solitude and the cool taste of the water, then froze when a cool voice broke the silence around him.

"Hungry, Jeb?"

A tiny squeak escaped Jeb's throat and he jumped up and whirled around in alarm, his heart beginning to race. He froze in place and felt a wave of relief overwhelm him when he peered through the shadows and realized he recognized the kraguer standing calmly behind him as Secka. A shaky sigh of relief breathed out of his chest as the outlaw stepped forward. The light from above cast a silvery glow over the kraguer's smoky gray fur, pitch black stripes, and gleaming gray eyes. Sitting in the shadows near the back of the cave, the outlaw curled his black-tufted tail over his paws and watched Jeb calmly.

Nobody knew what crime the gray outlaw had been exiled for, but he didn't have the cruel, sadistic personality of a murderer or the greedy attitude of a thief. Everybody assumed from his apathetic disposition that he hadn't done anything too horrible to be banished to the Spring. Most of them thought he had simply caught Zerone on a bad day.

Secka raised an eyebrow. "I heard you had a bit of trouble a little while ago."

Jeb let out a sigh and glanced down at his paws. “Yeah, Citcha took the food my Mom brought in. I guess I am kind of hungry.”

Secka leaned down to grab a piece of fruit hidden in the shadows and threw it to him, his half-lidded gray eyes bored and nonchalant. “Enjoy.”

Jeb managed a weak smile and started to step forward to take the food, then froze.

A cold, dangerous snicker sounded from the shadows covering the back of the cavern. Secka glanced back with a bored sigh to see a red-furred outlaw step out from one of the cave dens at the back of the Spring and stalk toward him. “Sharing with the arsonist?” the outlaw mocked, raising an eyebrow.

Secka rolled his eyes and glanced back at him with an annoyed look. “Shut up. I’m not in the mood for you, so lay off. Besides,” he muttered with a bored flick of his tail, “everyone knows Jeb didn’t start the fire.”

The kraguer narrowed his eyes. “Says who?”

“Says me,” Jeb squeaked. A shiver raced down his spine and he shrank back in terror when the outlaw cast a disdainful glance in his direction.

Secka let out an annoyed sigh and glanced over to mutter to the outlaw, his voice as calm and unperturbed as always. “Jeb is a coward who’s afraid of his own shadow. Cowards don’t run around starting the forest on fire.”

Indignation made Jeb’s fur prickle at the insult, but when the other outlaw gave him a dangerous glare, he shrank back and didn’t say a word. His heart beat rapidly with fear and he prepared to run. Secka’s words hurt, but he knew they were true.

The red outlaw sighed and rolled his eyes. “Fine. I still don’t like him though.”

Secka snorted and glanced around him in boredom. “You don’t like anybody.”

“Is there any reason I should?” The criminal narrowed his eyes. “Everybody hates Zerone—even his own Empire—and all the criminals down here do is take up space and annoy me. You’re the worst one of the bunch, actually.”

“Fascinating,” Secka muttered, his monotonous voice tinged with sarcasm. “Maybe you should have thought about that before you committed a crime and got yourself exiled.” He raised his paw as he spoke and distractedly studied his sharp claws, as if the outlaw he was speaking to was barely worth his time.

The other criminal scoffed. “Look who’s talking! You’re a criminal, too, and you’re stuck down here just like the rest of us last time I checked!”

Secka just shrugged and flicked his tail uncaringly. “So? It’s not so bad down here. Now get back to your cave den. Talking to you is starting to bore me.”

The red kraguer gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes in fury, but after a long moment, he finally let out a low growl and whirled around. Muttering under his breath, he stalked back toward one of the jagged holes at the back of the Spring and disappeared into the shadows, leaving Jeb and Secka alone.

Secka glanced at the place where the criminal had disappeared with raised eyebrows and rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I’m going back to my den to sleep. Night, Jeb.”

“Goodnight,” Jeb murmured softly, gazing distractedly down at his paws. After a long moment of hesitation, he glanced back at the moonlit hole leading into the upper world. His heart skipped in his chest at the thought of the upper world, but when he heard the sound of paws thudding against stone, he whipped around to face the gray outlaw. “Secka, wait! Is anyone up there?”

Secka paused and followed his gaze up to the hole leading into the world above. Looking back down to meet Jeb’s wide eyes, he shrugged nonchalantly. “As far as I know, there’s no one up there. I was just out a minute ago. All of Zerone’s kraguers are asleep by now and far away from here. They won’t catch you sneaking around up there.”

Jeb heaved a sigh of relief. “Okay, good. Thanks.”

Secka turned around and trailed off into the shadows. “If your parents freak out, I’ll tell them you went up for a while.”

Jeb glanced guiltily down at his paws. “Thanks, I guess. I just hope they don’t panic too much like they usually do.” He winced when he thought of the terror his parents felt at the thought of being caught up on the surface world by Emperor Zerone’s guards. Criminals were technically



supposed to stay in the Spring and *never* leave to visit the upper world, but no one ever paid attention to that law and no one bothered to enforce it. A tiny glimmer of fear burned in Jeb's chest at the thought of being seen in the upper world, but he pushed it away. The small risk of being up there was worth getting a breath of fresh air and getting away from the filthy grime of the underground for a few minutes.

Secka let out a tiny chuckle. "Your parents panic if a fly buzzes in their ear, but I'll try to keep their noise down so the other outlaws don't get mad."

Jeb tried not to wince and simply nodded. "Thanks."

Secka just shrugged and padded forward, vanishing into the darkness shrouding the cavern. Taking a deep breath, Jeb slowly turned around to stare out at the sparkling waters of the Spring, closed his eyes, and leapt forward. Shivers raced down his spine at the shock and sting of the sudden rush of freezing cold water washing over his body, but he ignored the chill spreading through him. Spreading out the webbing between his toes, he reached up with his paws and swam upward until his head finally broke the surface of the Spring. Gasping for air, he blinked water out of his eyes and paddled over to the tiny stretch of stone on the opposite side of the spring.

A cold wind breezed past him when he finally dug his claws into the stone on the other side and pulled himself up, but he tried not to shiver with cold. Shaking himself and sending droplets of water flying everywhere, he glanced up at the hole in the ceiling and leapt upward, digging his claws into the side of the hole. Narrowing his eyes, he struggled to pull himself up through the hole leading into the upper world and heaved a sigh when he finally hauled himself up over the edge and rolled onto the stiff green grass.

Towering trees rose up around him, forming a thick, dark canopy over his head. Pink, purple, green, and blue leaves rustled in a soft breeze, and the bright, shimmering moon above him cast a silvery glow down on the colorful trees. Orange, turquoise, white, and yellow bushes sprung up around the rough trunks of the trees and plants of every color of the rainbow grew up from the ground. The hard, cool green grass rose up high enough to brush his white belly. Shadows covered the woods around him, making shivers race up his spine when he wondered if Secka was mistaken

and some of Zerone's followers truly were hiding behind the enormous, rainbow-colored trees.

Taking a deep breath, Jeb closed his eyes and tried to relax. When he squeezed his eyes shut, he could still picture the terrifying images from his nightmare and the horrifying memories of everything that had happened just one year ago. The crackling, roaring sound of the fire seemed to echo in his ears as the images flashed through his mind. Through the darkness, he could still see the wild, eerie orange and red light of the blaze illuminating the yellow and black-striped fur of Zerone, the Emperor of the forest. The terror glowing in Zerone's bright green and ashen gray eyes seemed to burn into Jeb's mind, sending shivers racing through him.

Pushing away the memories of Emperor Zerone, he shuddered when a new image flashed through his mind. He remembered racing through the burning forest close beside his father, dodging away from the flickering flames and struggling to escape. His father's narrowed green eyes had glowed in determination with the sickening light of the flames. The roar of the fire still burned in his memory and the intense heat that had wafted over him made him suddenly break out in a cold sweat. Cries and screams seemed to echo from over a distance as the memory played out in his mind. He remembered leaping over a fallen tree with his father, racing toward the sound of a terrified cry, and stumbling into a clearing flickering with fire. The desperate, pleading look of Emperor Zerone burned in his mind when he remembered staggering forward with his father and freeing the Emperor's paw from where it had been trapped underneath a small fallen log.

A loud, thundering smack echoed in Jeb's mind when he remembered helping Telku pull Zerone free from where he had been trapped by the fallen tree and pushing him away. He winced when he remembered feeling a whoosh of air rustle his fur and looking back just in time to see a flaming tree crash down right in the place where the Emperor had stood only moments ago. The memories seemed to blur when he thought of how Zerone had bounded away and disappeared behind a wall of flickering flames.

Jeb's eyes shot open with fear and the echoing sound of crackling flames slowly began to die away, letting the clearing around him drift back into focus. Feelings of horror and dismay washed over him as strongly as

they had a year ago when he had burst out of the burning forest into an untouched, peaceful clearing and whirled around to see the flames billowing up, turning the sky into nothing but a cloud of ash. Hours had passed by before the fire was finally stopped, but once the smoke had cleared, the terrified kraguers had been quick to ask questions. Backed into a corner, the Emperor had been quick to blame the ones closest to him when the fire had started: Jeb and his Dad.

The next few days had passed by in a blur. Jeb's calm, peaceful home in Zerone's Court on the outskirts of the Emperor's mansion had become a land of hostility and accusations. In less than a week, a meeting had been held in Zerone's Royal Court in the plaza outside of his mansion. He and his father had been accused as guilty of starting the fire and sentenced to live in the Spring with the other outlaws for the rest of their lives. It had been their word against the word of the ruler of the forest. By the time the trial was even half over, everyone in Zerone's Court had turned against them and cheered for their exile. Keruni, Jeb's 'best friend,' had been the first to agree to his sentence and had simply laughed when he had been forced to leave. As the Emperor's daughter, she had instantly believed her father's accusations over his protests. To that day, the only ones who knew the truth about who truly started the fire were the outlaws in the Spring.

Why Zerone had started the fire in the first place or whether it was an accident or not, Jeb didn't know. All he knew was that he was trapped with a horde of outlaws for the rest of his life because of what he did.

Trying to shake off his bitter thoughts, he glanced around at the clearing and peered into the shadows behind the trees. Shivers raced through him. If he looked closely enough, he thought he could see a hint of light brown sand stretching out past his forest. The Land Beyond the Forest. The thought sent a wave of cold fear crashing over him, raising every hair on his back and making his heart beat faster with terror. Taking a deep breath, he tore his gaze away from the sand he imagined waiting just a few miles in front of him and tried to shake off the cold chills racing through his body. The idea of the lands waiting beyond their home terrified every kraguer. The forest around them was the only safe haven for his kind. To take one step outside their forest would be to die.

Shivering violently in the cold night air, he turned around to race back toward the underground to get out of the freezing surface world, then froze when he heard a soft rustling sound. Whirling around, his eyes grew wide with horror when he spotted a dense clump of undergrowth rustling just a few paces away from him. A tiny squeak of fear escaped his throat, and his legs turned to stone, freezing him with fear.

A mocking laugh cut through the peaceful silence of the night. "Still afraid of your own shadow, huh, Jeben?"

Jeb's eyes widened when he recognized the cold, high-pitched voice. Before he could speak or run, a tiny kraguer stepped out from the bushes, snickering and sneering.

"Still a scaredy-cat, I see." The kraguer's green eyes sparkled with amusement and arrogance as she sat back and smirked at Jeb. "You haven't changed much."

Jeb flattened his ears. "Shut up, Keruni! I'm not a scaredy-cat!"

She snickered and raised an eyebrow. "Sure you are!"

Jeb narrowed his eyes to protest, then sighed and let the insult die away. "Never mind," he muttered. "What are you doing out here anyway?"

She lashed her tail in a challenge. "What are you?"

He flattened his ears. "I asked first."

Keruni rolled her eyes. "What are we? Five? I'm here because I can go where I want. You, on the other hand, can't. Outlaws like you aren't allowed to leave the Spring."

Jeb's fur bristled in fury. "I shouldn't *be* an outlaw! I didn't do anything!"

Keruni rolled her eyes with a condescending sigh. "At this rate, you'll be saying that on your deathbed. You're such a liar, Jeb, and a bad one at that."

"Oh, you mean like Emperor Zerone?" he shot back, lashing his tail in anger.

She bristled and let out a cold hiss of fury. "My Daddy is not a liar! You are!"

Jeb let out an exasperated sigh. "If you believe that, you'll believe anything!"

Keruni snorted and flicked her tail with a flippant, condescending look. "Just give it up. Everyone knows you started that fire, so just drop it,

you traitor.”

Jeb winced. “You’re the traitor! You were the first one to agree to having me thrown out of Zerone’s Court and exiled to live with the outlaws just because Zerone said I should! Why did you listen to him? You were supposed to be my best friend!”

“My Daddy’s always right, so why shouldn’t I have listened to him?” Keruni sniffed. “And we were never friends. I just hung out with you when I was bored.” She shook her head in disgust as Jeb gaped at her in disbelief. “‘Best friends.’ Ha! You were a worthless friend. Whenever something made a sound, you would run and hide! If something bad happened, you would just cower under a bush and leave me to get hurt!”

Jeb’s eyes widened in shock as sharp pain stabbed into his heart. Shaking his head desperately, he faced Keruni and gritted his teeth. “That—that’s not true!”

She smirked and let out a cold, humorless snicker in her high, lofty voice. “Sure it is. Who would want to be friends with a dumb, pathetic coward like you?”

Jeb blinked and shook his head, trying to push back the sting of tears and the memories flashing through his mind. Taking a deep breath, he stumbled past her, trying to block out the grief rising in his chest. “Forget it, Keruni. I have to get back to the Spring.”

Keruni sniffed and glanced over her shoulder when he stumbled past her. “Really? So what’s it like living with the scum of the forest?”

Jeb winced and gritted his teeth, freezing in his tracks and feeling a surge of anger overwhelm the sorrow in his chest. Not bothering to turn around, he stood rigidly in place and let out a cold hiss. “You know, Keruni...it’s a lot like being with you.” Without waiting for her reply, he turned away from her and leapt into the hole leading into the Spring. Guilt burned in his chest only seconds after he had bolted away from her, making his heart skip with regret and grief. Trying to shake it off and ignore the guilt, he sat back against the cold stone and heaved a sigh. He seemed to sag with tiredness and exhaustion and he longed to get back to his den and fall asleep, but a tiny part of him knew that his own regret would keep him awake. Letting out another long sigh, he took a deep breath and turned to face the darkness around him.

When he woke up the next morning, he would remember the night as the night he had a painful run-in with his enemy. In the future, he would remember it as the night before the creatures invaded.

Stars twinkled in the black night sky miles away, shining down on a lone animal trudging painfully across a bleak landscape. His head sagged and his paws felt heavy with exhaustion, but he forced himself to keep moving, desperate to find the ones he missed. Some part of him wondered if he would ever see them again or if they had already moved on and he was searching for no reason, but the other part of him refused to stop. Even if they had forgotten him, he could never forget them. Searching for them to make sure they had found a safer home and better luck was all he had left.

Other worries nagged at his mind with every step he took. As if his own nostalgia wasn't bad enough, he was starting to find it a bit difficult to hide from the ones who hated him so strongly. Avoiding them was a priority. If he slipped up and got caught, his death was all but assured, and this time it would be permanent. To make his suffering worse, food was getting harder and harder to find and the thought of trying to take food from around the homes of his enemies was anything but assuring.

Letting out a soft sigh, he glanced down at the journal tied around his neck and wondered what the animals he missed so badly thought of him. Were they upset by his fate? Or had they recovered and gone on with their lives? Feeling a tingle of pain and guilt, he hoped they were smart enough to leave his memory behind. They would have enough to deal with without having to mourn over what might have happened to him.

He padded wearily onward, wandering alone through an endless expanse of barren land and thinking about the animals he missed. Deep down he wondered if he should give up and leave them alone. He had already done enough and a tiny voice in his head whispered that they wouldn't care about seeing him again. Trying to ignore the voice and the grief prickling his fur, he pushed the thoughts away and forced himself to take another step. Even if they didn't want to see him, he had to check up on them. He could always leave after he was sure they were all right and continue wandering alone. Forever.

A tiny hint of loneliness haunted him, but spending hours upon hours and days upon days alone didn't bother him too much. What bothered

him was the guilt that filled the emptiness left by the never-ending silence. With every step he took, every breath he breathed, and every memory he tried to relive, the guilt haunted him, tormenting him without mercy or any hope of stopping. The guilt was his only companion in his lonesome journey in daylight and his only shelter at night. Sleep seemed to always be just beyond his grasp. Not a single moment passed by without his conscience reminding him of his horrible deeds, but he accepted the guilt. He knew he deserved it.

Despite his best efforts to overcome his own self-hatred, his mind was constantly riddled with guilt and grief. Not a moment passed by without him remembering the past. Every day he replayed what he had done over and over again, seeing the terrified look in the amber eyes beneath him a thousand times and experiencing the taste of his brother's blood in his mouth as if he had done that horrible deed all over again.

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